Toradora! Volume7

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Toradora!:Volume7

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 7

とらドラ7!

停学が明け、大河が学校に戻ってくる。

折りしも世間はクリスマスの季節。クリスマス大好きという大河は、唐突にいい子バージョンに変身。一方、実乃梨は部活の試合でエラーをしたとかでふさぎこみ、竜児にもぎこちない態度を取るようになる。

そんな中、新生徒会長・北村が、有志によるクリスマスパーティの企画を立ち上げる。竜児や大河、そして学園の公式美少女、亜美の参加もあり準備は盛り上がるが、実乃梨は相変わらず元気がなくて——。はたしてクリスマスパーティの行方は!?

今回も目が離せない展開です！　超弩級ラブコメ第7弾！

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス

とらドラ7!

電撃文庫

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とらドラ7!
竹宮ゆゆこ

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竹宮(たけみや)ゆゆこ

2月24日生まれ、東京都在住。命の灯火が危うくなったので、温泉に浸かって、黄泉の国より帰還いたしました。群馬の四万温泉です。温泉マークをカプチーノに描いてくれるカフェもあります。温泉が好きだ！大好きだ！　温泉にならなにをされてもいいと言える!

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ!
とらドラ2!
とらドラ3!
とらドラ4!
とらドラ5!
とらドラ6!
とらドラ7!
とらドラ・スピンオフ！幸福の桜色トルネード

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれ東京都在住。ついに新しい椅子を購入しました。超快適！これでいつでも寝落ちできそうです。

カバー／暁印刷

とらドラ！

——それは12月24日、
クリスマスイブの夜の出来事だった。

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス

眠い目を擦りながら目を開けると、
「うふふ♥　イケメン専用パーティ会場はこっちよ♥」
お色気サンタの亜美ちゃんが俺を手招きしている。イケメン……？
俺のことではないか。これは行かねばなるまい。
迷うことなく、俺は扉の中へ足を踏み入れた。

パーティ会場に入ると、男は俺一人だ。右を見てもギャル！
「キャー！　みてみて奈々子、すっごい美少年が来たわよ！
ねえねえそこのキミ、こっちに来て来て、もっと来て～！」
左を見てもギャル！
「麻耶ったら騒がしいんだから……
でも、こういうタイプの知的な男の子、
あたしも嫌いじゃないなあ……？」

おっと、やめたまえ、そんなに強く胸を押しつけられたら
歩きにくいではないかフホホ……。
目のやり場に困りつつも、俺はさらに奥へと誘われていった。
期待はどんどん膨らんでいく。

「おっ、これはステキなジェントルメン！　YO！
パーティはまだ長い、よかったらここで腹ごなしをしていきなされ！」
オゥフ！　怪しい奴！　結構！　No　sankyu！　いりません！
俺は華麗にスルーを決めた。
おてもと
OHASHI

「なによ……私やみのりんと一緒じゃおもしろくないっていうの？
せっかくのクリスマスだから、『楽しいこと』しようと思って
待ってたのに……もういい、ばか。帰るもん」
おっとこれはなんという!?
ままま待ちたまえ、キミはスルー対象ではない！
叫びながら、俺は必死に彼女の方へ走ろうとしたが、
「あいた！」……しまった、転んでしまったー！

あいたた……起き上がった俺に、誰かが手を伸べてくれた。
「キミ、大丈夫か!?　気を確かに!」
「裸だよ俺たち裸だよ」
いやぁぁぁ!
汚い!　グロい!　寄るでない!　隠したまえ!
俺はもっとかわいくてお色気たっぷりの
プリティサンタさんたちと遊びたいんだぁぁ!

「『かわいくてお色気たっぷりのプリティサンタ』というのは俺のことかーい!?」
ぎゃ――――……
――俺の悲鳴はクリスマスイブの夢の中に溶けて……消えた……。

「け、けがわら、けわら、汚らわしいいい！」
……っていう夢を見たんだよ！
「なーんで私だけお色気じゃないのさー!?」
「やだぁ～春田くんってば～♥」
「おいおい、俺はもっと胸板厚いぞ？　見るか？」
「北村と一緒は嫌だー！」
「あらあら、困った困った……うふふ」
「エロ野郎！　さいってー！」
「俺が一番気の毒じゃねえか！」
一部お見苦しい映像をお見せしてすいません！
本編はこんな悪夢ではないのでご安心ください！

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

Chapter 1

– She didn't really want to admit she'd been bothered about something else, but...

Sitting on a frozen, battered bench, and hanging her neck low with a glove resting on her head, Kushieda Minori still couldn't bring herself to stand up. Each of her teammates had tried to give her words of encouragement . *Captain, please cheer up; Everybody was in bad shape today; These days happen; It's only a practice match, don't worry about it.* .....She couldn't not worry about it. As their captain, it was too pathetic. She couldn't forgive herself for fouling up this miserably.

If she'd been asked if she played in this match, with really, honestly, no distractions, at 100% concentration, the fact was that she couldn't give a firm yes.

It had happened at the end of the ninth inning, with two outs, bases empty, and a three to one lead at the final stretch.

The ball, making a dumb sound as it was hit, had come falling down in a slow bounded arc, like it was saying

catch me to the glove she had drawn out. Okay, we won, then, catch. Throw it to first and game over, or what should have been game over. But instead of that, "What!? " "What are you doing, Kushieda!" "Kya!"

The screaming had come from their bench. Shouts of, " We did it, we did it!" "Go, run!" were coming from the bench of the other school. No way. All the hairs on her head bristled. For some reason, the ball fell out of her glove before she could throw it. The more she panicked, the more the situation worsened, and when she tried to pick up the rolling ball, she accidently kicked it away. There were cries telling her to run. Nowaynowaynoway, not good, not good, not good. When she failed at picking it up again, the runner had already made it to second base. With screaming and cheering in the backdrop, she finally picked up the ball and threw it to third base. But, it was a bad throw. The runner made it to home plate. So then.

The dust had been so thick she could choke from it.

Her body had been chilled by the midwinter wind.

It had been the late afternoon of one Sunday. The light of the sun was tilted.

She had sat there, vanquished and unable to rise up.

.....It was like a domino effect. The stupid mistake of their ace member, Kushieda Minori, was the trigger that broke the team's concentration and since then, it hadn't recovered. One person went to first base due to a walk on balls, and in no time flat, the other team scored back one point thanks to more and more errors, and then finally, a homerun.

"Aaaa..... no....."

She hunched her back while holding her glove-hooded head. She pushed her nose against her knee, not minding the dirt on it.

It wasn't her team's fault. It wasn't okay because it was a practice match. It wasn't that she was in bad shape. It wasn't just today.

It was because she had been distracted and couldn't concentrate. That's the reason for this mess. In other words, if she kept being like this, her team probably wouldn't be able to win again.

".....What am I doing....."

* * *

"What are you doing!?"

"I didn't do anything....."

You dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, super-dilly-dallier! ------The midwinter breeze spiraled like a typhoon with the showered insults and whirled up from Takasu Ryuuji's feet. With bangs of hair fluttering and eyes wide open inside the whirl of frozen wind, his appearance was most certainly, an illustration of the explosive birth of a demon king. His sinister countenance would have given onlookers the impression that he could blow away a star or two as he pleased. Except, it's not

like he became a demon king because he wanted to. He's just a little down because somebody pointed out a certain fact to him in public.

"......There was nothing I could do! After all,"

"Shup!"

The mystery shout was accompanied by a roundtrip slap on the right and the left. He had probably been told to shut up. Holding both cheeks, Ryuuji fell silent. Yet again, he was taken aback by this sudden act of violence. Then,

"Don't make excuses you damn dilly-dallier! You damn dilly-dallying, damn ugly, damn horny Russell Terrier! Be a rice stocker for the rest of your life! Fish-flake smearer! You and your Blacky, the Sea Lion face!"

The intensifying verbal abuse was like a multi-warhead missile launched from another dimension . The missiles inside gorged the heart of the demon king by force from all angles and was finished off by the mocking sound of a "Keh!" The hooligan....., no, that's too soft a description for her. That "ogre" tilted her body back with cold arrogance.

Her pose was haughty. Her raised chin was arrogant. Her scorn-filled half-opened eyes emitted coldness. That girl, cheeks tinged in rose-red from the cold wind and brushing her hair upwards, was Aisaka Taiga – the beautiful evil ogre known as the Palmtop Tiger.

Her French-doll-like, delicate, beautiful face; her petite small stature which is also the reason why she is called " palmtop"; and her voice, which from her build, was surprisingly low, cool, and had little vocal inflection,

".....Ryuuji, you might really live the rest of your life alone....."

Slash! He was cut across from the shoulder.

Ryuuji turned into a silent stone statue on the street. This was more brutal than the roundtrip slap, he thought . Just listen to this cruel statement, the icing on top of the cake of a "to defeat" by "slander"-propelled onslaught of derision. Wasn't this violence itself? Officer, is this really okay? Is this justice, Japan? Shouldn't this be enforced by the law? Scraping together the shattered pieces of his courage and holding tight his broken heart, Ryuuji gathered power in both his eyes. He mustered together his courage and glared at Taiga.

"D-.....don't think that this law-abiding nation will let you go running wild forever.....!"

"Haa?"

His life-and-death act of defiance turned into dust and was wiped out in an instant in the face of her ear-picking "Haa?" Cold wind blew between the two of them, separated by sharp silence.

It was that kind of midwinter Sunday.

The sun fell fast. Even though it was a little past five o'clock, the sky already begun to show the colors of the night. The familiar shopping area was just a little bit crowded and full of housewives and their families, masked old ladies groups, and youngsters on their way to entertain themselves.

His elbow lightly bumped against by a passerby. Ryuuji gently lowered his head on reflex and moved out of the way. That's right, now matter how much that horrible thing she said had hurt, he couldn't keep standing still like a statue in the middle of the street.

He'll get in the way of the pedestrian traffic. He returned to being a living human being with common sense and was about to start walking, but,

"......Huh? Taiga?"

He noticed that the other-dimensional-missile-firing ogre that had been right in front of him was gone. Even though she was an ogre, she was a palmtop tiger..... that didn't make sense, but anyway, what he wanted to say was that she was small. Petite Taiga might have been swept away by the crowd and become lost.

"Hey! Taiga, where did you go!"

With heavy eco-bags hanging on both arms, Ryuuji briefly moved right and left, wandering inside the crowd , looking for the hair swirl of the missing Taiga. The visual markers he was looking for were wavy hair reaching the waist, an expensive-looking white Angora coat, and a fluffy men's muffler wrapped three times.

They would both be going back to the same Takasu residence anyway, and even if she returned to her own home, her apartment was next door. In this case, he thought it was okay if they went home separately, but it was more than a little worrisome to him that he had lost

sight of her under this chilly December sky. Where was she? Furrowing his brows at this, he looked around for her, but then, "Eek!" He mentally told the young mother carrying her child and running to the edge of the street to avoid him – I am not a street slasher. Then,

"What are you doing? You almost look like a street slasher when you're standing there."

"Ou! Where did you go, I've been looking for you! ..... Wait, you really don't give a damn about me at all....."

Taiga, smoothly appearing from the wave of passers-by, grinned, then said, "This, this," showing him what her right hand was holding. Even though the lower half of it was covered with plastic wrap, the sweet smell of butter and milk, and the all-too-signature ring shape couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

"...A donut. Where did you get it?"

"Over there. Hehe. It smelled nice so I bought it! I don't know what it'll taste like, so I only bought one for now. If it's good, I'll line up again and buy a lot."

There was a white minivan parked past the alley that Taiga pointed at using the donut. The back hatch was

used as a makeshift storefront and several people were lined up. Now that she mentioned it, that area did smell sweet. To sweets lovers like Taiga, it must have been an irresistible scent. Even Ryuuji certainly didn't have any objection to the taste of sweets. "Really," he said, eyes automatically passing over the handwritten advertising board, but then, his head immediately tilted. The letters written with magic markers for what was thought to be the name of the store was "Krispy Kreamy" ..... That reeked of flat-out trademark infringement. Actually, what else could it be other than trademark infringement?

".....Is that really safe? The shop name's suspicious right off the bat."

"It's fine. See, see, that person over there is eating while walking. It isn't poisoned. Probably."

"Why the hell do you have to brace yourself for something like that when you eat?"

"Because, look, it says Krispy Kreamy. Haha, this is definitely a rip-off."

"Which is why I said it's suspicious. A normal store wouldn't be using a name that identical because of trademarks."

"But, I just can't eat the ones from the real place. I once peeked inside, but it's always so crowded! I got sick just looking at the lines! But see, the people that eat their donuts say it, don't they? 'It's crisp, but it's fluffy, and melts in your mouth.' I really wanted to taste it."

"Yeah, they do say their donuts taste totally different from other donuts."

"Yes, yes. And if they're being this bold about selling their donuts with that close a name, don't you think they made their donuts so they'll taste close? Mmmm, it smells good! And now, for the taste..."

Opening her big mouth with an "Ahh," Taiga bit down on the edge of the donut ill-manneredly on the street. At that very moment, her pleasant smile gradually dulled and her expression turned dubious with each jaw-biting motion.

"......How was it? Different from the other stores, huh?"

Taiga nodded while chewing. However, her tension was obviously low.

"Yes... it's... certainly... different..... It's kind of, dry. The water in my mouth is being sucked up....."

"Eat all of it. Don't waste food."

"Ah, I have a good idea! Let's leave this in your closet. I bet it'll suck up the humidity."

"Eat all of it. Don't waste food."

"Ugh....."

Looking at the large donut with some bitterness, Taiga frowned. The people that bought the same thing and were eating and walking did seem lively. Nobody had collapsed. But their expressions were uniformly dubious. Taiga also joined the group of dubious expressions. Neither Ryuuji nor Taiga were meddlesome enough to go out of their way to tell the junior high girls happily lining up with change in one hand and shrieking, "Hey, donuts~!", "Hey, it's Krispy Kreme (incorrect)~!" that it tasted awful.

"Dammit, why did you have to eat something strange before dinner? How much did you pay?"

"200 yen....."

"Two hundred yen! You paid 200 yen to eat a closet moisture absorber!"

This was his revenge for the previous verbal abuse. Actually, it wasn't so much as that. He had to bring himself to say something to Taiga, donut in one hand and tension spiraling downwards. This was educational instruction to make sure she didn't make the same mistake ever again.

Incidentally, tonight's dinner was a simple yellowtail and Mizuna nabe made with Japanese alcohol, complete with spicy hot lotus root and burdock kinpira with chicken skin, and mixed grain rice cooked with ginger. And frankly, the yellowtail was expensive. Fillets, but still expensive. Caught wild, so they were expensive. But he bought them. Three person's worth. Because it's the season! Even the fish-farmed ones aren't cheap so if he was going to buy yellowtail, he might as well take the wild one! And, also,

"Today's yellowtail nabe is for your celebration!"

"I know....."

"You're not psyched up enough! You don't get it! You're getting fooled by strange street stall donuts because you're acting like that! You saw the price, didn't you!? You can tell I'm psyched, right!? How dare you waste the space in your stomach on an awful snack..... I don't want to have to be petty about this, but the yellowtail is my treat! Dammit, I don't care if it's fake, give me a jubilant reaction that's worth the amount it cost !"

"Yay, yay, it's yellowtail, it's yellowtail!"

"Do it again!"

"A big catch of yellowtail~, yippy!"

Gazing at Taiga jumping with expressionless delight with the donut in one hand and her long hair bobbing up and down, Ryuuji nodded his head. With this done, the yellowtail and the several bills that vanished from the Takasu family budget can go to heaven appeased. Taiga's 200 yen will probably become angry spirits and wander aimlessly for eternity, but they're not in Ryuuji's jurisdiction.

That's right. Tonight's a celebration. Tomorrow, Monday, Taiga's suspension will end. From tomorrow,

Taiga can go to school. Now that he thought about it, those two weeks went by quickly.

In other words, two weeks have already passed since that nightmarish incident – Ryuuji sighed once more. A nightmare, or a..... no, he didn't want to remember it. What was the use in remembering? The fact was that Taiga didn't get expelled and could go to school again tomorrow. Isn't that more than enough? That's how Ryuuji felt, with a peaceful feeling inside of him, but,

".....So. We were still in the middle of that conversation. Why are you, like this?"

The girl in the Angora coat narrowed both her eyes. Just the slight movement of her eyelids made him predict that tyranny would come dripping out. Cautiously distancing himself, he asked her,

".....Like, what?"

"Like why are you such a dilly-dallier. Why can't you do anything in the chance you had when a pest like me was out of the way. Why can't you raise your intimacy level with Minorin. That's what I wanted to say. Just what have you been doing? For whose sake do you think I became suspended?"

"......That wasn't for my sake, you know."

"Don't change the subject, you coward!"

"......"

Ryuuji instinctively shut his mouth from the irrationality that penetrated the pit of his body bit by bit. Taiga closed the distance between them with no pause and began further pursuit.

"You could have walked to school with her, just the two of you, when I wasn't here! You could have asked her to eat lunch with you! You could have made plans with her over the weekend! There were tons of things that you should have done, right!? So why haven't you!? I bet you haven't even been sending emails to each other, right!? Ha! What a laugh, you dilly-dallying, dilly-dallying, dilly-da... ow! I bit my tongue.....!"

Ryuuji, seizing this chance, succeeded in presenting his excuse to Taiga as she held her mouth back in agony.

"There was really nothing I could have done! If you're gone, Kushieda won't come to the usual spot in the morning, she'll eat lunch with the other girls, I'm not

close to those girls, and after school, she'd be with her club the whole time! Even with email, there's nothing I can think of that I can send casually!"

Once he said it, he felt pathetic. But this was the truth.

When Taiga was suspended and stopped going to school, all the common ground between Ryuuji and Minori vanished in an instant. Because of how long his crush was, the distance between the two of them shrank – it still wasn't a romantic relation yet, but at least it seemed like they became friends. But, ultimately, without Taiga, their common point, Ryuuji couldn't even keep up a conversation with Minori. Of course, it wasn't as if they were ignoring each other, and they had been greeting each other on the level of good morning, bye bye, YO, how you doing, if they saw each other.

Ryuuji was about to make a long sigh but stopped. Ah ha. He lifted his face.

".....Then again, compared with April, this is a big improvement.....? Yeah, it might be."

He crossed his arms, about to convince himself with a yep, yep, that might be true follow-up, but...

"OF. COURSE. IT. IS. N'T. YOU. DIL. LY. DAL. LI. ER!
"

"Hiwaaai....."

A new type of scream, one never made before, emerged from his throat. That's our Taiga, the rare scream maker. But, this was not the time to be saying that.

Taiga's fingers had grabbed Ryuuji's upper lip as if to pull and were going tear it with full force from above. In this situation where it seemed like the part connecting the gums and the inner side of the upper lip could go RIIIP at any moment, Ryuuji unconsciously tilted his head upwards and stood tiptoed, out of fear that his whole face might be ripped off.

"Because she won't wait for you? That's stu-pid! Stu-pid, stu-pid, stwuuuupid! How long are you going to take the ‘wait approach'!? Who do you think you are!? Hachikou!? If you shut up, be passive, and wait, do you think Minorin is going to conveniently ask you out!? Ooh my, oh my, what a loser! How horrifying! My God!"

"Huuhiwawa!"

Pulling the upper lip upwards with wrongful power, Taiga raised her donut. It was ghastly just imaging what she might do to him with it.

"This habitually opportunistic procrastinator must be given the death penalty! Keep on waiting for Minorin in the afterlife!"

"Hahyaaaaaa!"

- Help!

He closed his eyes and began seeing his life flash before his eyes from this genuine life and death crisis. Nursery school..... wetting myself at graduation..... entering primary school..... I was the only one with a used backpack..... school trip at grade 2..... Yasuko woke up late so no packed lunch.....a nd right around that time , people started calling me Gangster-kun.....

"Ah."

At the same time she uttered this small voice, Taiga's fingers came off of Ryuuji's upper lip abruptly. Staggering after being freed from the upward gravity hoisting his face, he opened his tear-moist eyes. Then,

".....Ou.....!"

Ryuuji also grunted quietly. The people around stopped moving, and here and there, there were cries of " Wah!" and "Wow!"

A band of light raced across the store fronts lined up on both sides of the street.

Illumination, probably purchased by the neighborhood committee, lit up all at once. Twinkling gold blinked on and off in loops and waves as if to trail the buildings, while glittering blue traced a brilliant flashing but continuing arch. The sky of the shopping area became a vivid planetarium in a wink and drowned out the pale evening stars.

The light was beautiful.

BGM starting off with the sound of bells ringing came out from the speakers, and a smiling Santa and a red-nosed reindeer nestling against each other were brightly lit in a fir tree-shaped lamp hanging on a street lamp. In the balloon-type illumination, the letters "Merry Christmas!" twinkled.

".....Right..... yes, that's right! It's almost Christmas.....!

Surrounded by twinkling lights, Taiga broadly stretched out her arms and looked at the sky. An innocent smile, one that he had never seen before, appeared on her face. She whirled around and turned to Ryuuji.

"Wo.....w! Oh, how beautiful! .....How wonderful! There wasn't anything this fabulous last year!"

The twinkling LEDs reflecting in her eyes dazzled with gem-like brilliance. "I wonder if there's a tree somewhere!?" – As he looked at Taiga, before he knew it, Ryuuji forgot about the pain in his upper lip and smiled.

"Ou! They really put a lot of energy into this year's decorations. Christmas, huh? Yeah, it's pretty soon."

"You know, about Christmas. I---....."

Once she shut her eyes tight, closed her fists, and crouched her legs, Taiga jumped ridiculously with her arms and legs stretched out as if she were exploding like a firework and shouted, "LOVE IT". *Oh my, that girl sure*

is happy, noticed the passers-by, smiling. With both her hands still extended and her head bent backwards facing the sky, the sparkle in Taiga's eyes twinkled even more. It even looked as if she were teary-eyed, as if she would cry.

"Ah, what fun.....! I'll have to be a good girl for a while ! I have to be a good girl! Since he'll be arriving in Japanese airspace soon!"

"Who will?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's Santa! Santa Claus!"

Taiga shouted this with no embarrassment and beamed.

"Let me have this. I'll carry the other bag for you."

One eco-bag was stolen from Ryuuji's arm. Ah, thief! ... ...Er, no. Then he moved by reflex.

".....Wha, what is it?"

"Taiga, don't die!"

"I don't have a fever," she said, pushing away Ryuuji's hand which had been pressed against her forehead. The way she used her hands, however, was far gentler than normal. There was neither harshness nor scorn in her earnest eyes as well.

"Sometimes I want you to let me help you, that's all! At least for now, when Santa's approaching, I really am going to be a good girl. I really, really, love Christmas!"

"No, I understand that, but it's too sudden and..... uh, why? Why do you like Christmas that much?"

"What do you mean, "why?" Do I need a reason to like Christmas!? See, the town's all sparkly and pretty, everyone is smiling and happy and..... that's right! Ryuuji, please, on the 25th, make an amaaaazing dinner! Something amazing that we haven't eaten normally before! Like, *TA-DAH, it's chicken*! Or, *TA-DAH, it's beef*! Or! The stuff foreigners eat!"

TA-DAH, it's chicken! TA-DAH, it's beef!

.....Had there ever been words that caused Ryuuji's heart to race so much? Ryuuji's raised sanpaku eyes glimmered with crazed excitement and trembled. Then,

he licked his lips..... but it wasn't all because he was thinking about *TA-DAH, it's chicken!*,*TA-DAH, it's beef!*, *TA-DAH, it's human!*, or *higiigyaahahahafu!* The romantic Christmas lights were simply sparkling in his opened eyes.

"Now that you've already said it, I suddenly can't wait to try it out.....! Ou! I'm fired up! Christmas dinner is going to be an extraordinary feast, right! Okay, leave it to me!"

"I leave it to you! I'll go to the department basement and buy whole the most delicious cake they have! Ehehehe, which one should I go to!? Should it be Bûche de noel!? Ah, I better buy a magazine and do some research! Oh right, I should get champagne for Yacchan, the best type they have!"

Kyaaa, what fun! The two of them were pumped up for a while on the street, and then. "Now then." Even the timing of how they suddenly shut their mouths was in perfect sync.

"The problem is....."

".....Eve, right. .....I don't know who's responsible for deciding it, but"

"To the public, it's a day for couples....."

Ryuuji and Taiga exchanged glances and both sighed immediately after. What had been on their minds, of course, were their respective crushes. For Ryuuji, it was Kushieda Minori, and for Taiga, it was Kitamura Yuusaku.

In particular, in Taiga's case, there were circumstances that would make her want to at least sigh.

".....I, can't do it. I can't ask him. It's, ...how should I say it? It's like taking advantage of him when he's down ? That's what it feels like..... Taking advantage of his broken heart."

It happened two weeks ago. On the same day that Taiga was suspended, Kitamura masterfully performed the feat of being rejected by the previous Student Council President in front of all the students of the school.

Just the fact that Kitamura had a bro..... a woman he loved was probably a shock to Taiga, but because that bro..... woman was physically separated in the form of study abroad, it became unnecessarily difficult to create a "fair" situation. Even Ryuuji could understand this well.

But speaking of a fair environment being difficult to make,

"But, Kitamura's been worried about you being suspended."

"No way! .....Really? We-well I did get emails asking me about how I was doing."

"For real. If you invited Kitamura, he definitely wouldn't say no."

"Aaah.... you think!? But I don't really like that! It's like subtly forced..... I can't tell if he is really happy about being asked, or if he's only being nice."

".....Yeah, maybe. If you were a woman deft enough to take advantage of the situation and settle things at once, you wouldn't be merrily shopping with me for tonight's dinner, on a Sunday night that's also the night before the end of your suspension."

Together with Taiga, who was weakly muttering *You're right*, Ryuuji once again slowly began to walk.

Needless to say, he wanted to support Taiga's romance , but this situation was too messy. Taiga started a fight with the person that turned Kitamura down and was suspended as a result. Kitamura naturally feels indebted to Taiga and there was probably no way that he'd refuse anything that Taiga asked of him. In other words, because she had such an advantage, it was unfair, which made it harder for her to act.

Next to this weakened Taiga, Ryuuji also had the blues . He thought that he also definitely couldn't ask the person he liked on a date on Christmas Eve.

If there was a reason he couldn't ask Minori out, it was much simpler than Taiga's. First, that day was Christmas Eve. Honestly, there was a lot of pressure. The date of December 24 was far too romantically oriented globally (or was that only in Japan?). If he tries having a date on that day, it's going to turn into a confession or a proposal. He didn't think it was a day where he could get away with an, I had fun today, anyway, I'll see you later, line. And confessing to Minori – c-c-c-c-can't do it. It's too fast, impossible. And the next reason was even more practical.

In a busy season like Christmas Eve for the foodservice industry, labor-loving Minori was probably going to be busy with part-time work. This was very possible.

"Aaah..... Even if I can't ask Kushieda out, it's boring to stay inside the house. Still, if we go outside, the couples are going to be all lovey-dopey..... How about we rent a DVD and watch it at your place?"

"Hah!? What are you saying you horne- "

"Oh, no, must be a good girl, must be a good girl.....," she said, closing her mouth shut, distorted from nearly insulting him, and then massaged her face around the center of her forehead. Then, she formed a gentle anti-Santa face and said,

".....Oh Ryuuji dear, so full of sexual lust you are. That's not good, what are you saying? You will ask Minorin out just fine. You'll be fine. I'm with you; I, who have been reborn as the angel of this love, Lord Angel Taiga."

YAY. She gave the V-sign for victory. Ryuuji instantaneously replied,

"I feel sick!"

His honest feelings blurted out from his mouth. However, Taiga still remained gentle, clasped her hands in prayer and said,

"Say what you will. The present me is a living Buddha. "

"You're pulling the same facial transformation routine that Kawashima does! And hold on, you're a Buddha!? Weren't you supposed to be an angel!"

"Right, I'm an angel, an angel. In order to protect everyone's happy Christmas, Angel Taiga is unwaveringly prepared to roll up a sleeve or two and even take it all off."

"......Uh huh, take it all off. I heard it, so you better follow up. You're going to do just that."

"Do as you please! But plan your usage carefully! Anyway, you will ask Minorin out for a Christmas Eve date! Absolutely! Angel Taiga will handle the production ! Uhehe, I wonder if Santa's looking! At my pure and good determination!"

"....."

As Taiga was getting carried away with her eyes sparkling from the lights, Ryuuji no longer had the willpower to be the straight man. It was honestly too difficult for him to comprehend how Taiga could be in such a hyper high-tension state just by the coming of Christmas. It was beyond Ryuuji's understanding. However, what was the point in raising the hurdles even further for this drastically low-success-rate mission? There's nothing more worrisome as much as when Taiga's motivated – but he couldn't say that out loud.

"Ryuuji, do your best! Yes, it's Christmas after all! .....I want everyone to be happy! Which is why I have to be a ‘ good girl'!"

Swinging her hair, Taiga looked hard at the lights, her eyes brightening, and apparently hardened her unwavering determination or whatever it was. The worrisome-ness also became bigger and bigger as if it were proportional to her increasing determination.

"I don't need your backup. Stop it, I mean it."

"Why?"

Finally, Ryuuji broke the silence.

"Because I definitely can't do it! Asking her for a date on Christmas Eve? That's spilling the beans about me liking her, isn't it!? I knew it, I can't do it, I can't do it! It's blatantly fishy! I can't ask her casually!"

"You don't have to be ca, ca, ca, geez….you don't have to be casual about it."

Haughtily sticking her chest out and raising an eyebrow, Angel Taiga stuck a white finger onto the tip of Ryuuji's nose. That was close – if this wasn't the angel version of Taiga, the finger might have gone up a nostril and poked his brain.

"It's fine if she finds out. Yes, take the opportunity to say flat out how you feel. It's Christmas, so you have to say what you want to say the most! Be honest, Ryuuji! You have me and Santa as your guardian spirits!"

"Te-te-te..... tell her how I.....! .....You idiot! There's no way I can do that, right!? It doesn't matter if you're an angel, if you're a Buddha, or if Santa's watching, I can't do what I can't do!"

Ryuuji frantically shook his head to the side as if blood was gushing from the top of his head. Well, yes, he did want to tell her how he feels. He wanted to just say he

liked her. He wanted his long crush to bloom, on Christmas Eve, on the day of lovers.

But Ryuuji was too clumsy, timid, and negative. He kept thinking of bad stuff like, what if his one-sided feelings inconvenienced Minori or what if it ended up destroying the feeble relationship they had constructed. He couldn't believe there was a happy next step waiting for him beyond the confession. That's why, it was good enough to keep things the way they were, that's how he felt.

"You'll be fiiine, you'll be fine, leave it to me," Taiga spoke softly, as if singing, while she started walking ahead of him. Then, within the busy crowd of pedestrians, she unexpectedly twirled around, and then, for some reason, put that partially bitten closet moisture absorber..... er, the donut ring, over her head.

"Ehehe, what do you think? Don't you think I really look like an angel!?"

".....You don't look like one. Also, crumbs are falling onto your head."

"No way!? Uwawa..... Brush it off, brush it off!"

Ryuuji, sighing, brushed the hair of a sorrowfully stupid Taiga. Small, sweet scented pieces of it sprinkled down the tip of her nose and her long hair. What an idiot she is, seriously.

– But, still.

Ignoring the production bit, it might not be so bad for there to be a "good girl" version of Taiga once a year. Ryuuji smiled slightly as he watched Taiga brush off the donut pieces that fell on to her face with her small hand.

Spending Christmas happily was, probably, the wish of all humanity.

* * *

"Ah! She's here! It's Tiger-san!"

"The Palmtop Tiger's returned to school!"

"Tiger-saaan! Welcome back!"

Uoooooo! – Rumbling and coarse shouting reverberated together with rowdy footsteps. Ryuuji unconsciously cringed and swiftly stepped aside to one side of the hallway. That turned out to be the correct course of action. Surrounding Taiga, who came to school for the first time in two weeks, were men to her right, men to her left, men in front, guy behind, men, men, menmenmen..... a men-filled "Palmtop Tiger Fan Club", also known as the martial arts maniac male students.

They were a group of men continuing to look at, with passionate eyes, the overwhelming power and natural fighting sense of the Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga, and her sadistic, ruthless tyranny. He had known about them for a while, actually. Their numbers gradually increased, and at the Cultural Festival, when Taiga performed in the pro-wrestling and the beauty contest, they multiplied , and before he knew it, they assembled a considerable number of people to become a fine corps of whackos.

"Takasu-kun, out of the way! Tiger-san, I have a question!"

"......Ou!"

Ryuuji was shoved out of the way and pushed further against the wall. In a blink of an eye, dozens of men were around Taiga, who had walked to school together with him. She was stuck in a whirl of roaring and sizzling hot frenzy, even thought it was winter.

"Tiger-san! We really want to know what happened! In the mythical Bro vs. Palmtop Tiger battle, Tiger-san won, right!?"

"Because you heard about Bro studying abroad, in order to settle things once and for all, you picked your

first and last fight with her, didn't you!? Uooo, what a hot plot twist!"

"We have faith in Tiger-san's victory!"

Good lord..... Ryuuji, kicked out of the frenzied ring, realized what had happened. The nightmarish battle two weeks back apparently mutated into this story among the students that didn't know the facts. And the matter of who won, still unclear because of conflicting reports, was that Bro went abroad and Taiga was suspended – However, it wasn't something that simple.

".....Silence!"

The men were silenced by Taiga's voice. Squinting their bedazzled eyes, the onlookers gratefully and reverently looked at the figure of Taiga, raising her hand as if to control the area. Ryuuji gulped. With a shout of keh! or kah!, a normal Taiga would shred, throw, shred, throw, then kick, stomp, spit, and finally put them on the ignore list. That is what should have happened. However , today's Taiga said,

"The fight on that day..... was very tough! A lot happened and it was dangerous!"

She was very much into this. She theatrically crossed her arms then closed her eyes like she was recalling what happened.

The men held their breath in reaction to Taiga's gracious words and brought their ears forward. Then, she dauntingly stood up to full height inside the circle of men and broadly opened her eyes.

"Hooooooowever!"

The men standing still and alert, rumbled. Then Ryuuji understood what was going on. Ah ha, so this was one part to the Christmas-only "good girl" Angel Taiga. With Christmas close at hand, good girl Taiga was trying to make her obnoxious fans happy.

"It should be obvious! The last one standing in the ring is the victor! In ooooooother words! I, am the true victor !"

That's Korosuke! cynically reacted Ryuuji alone, however, "UOOOOOOOOooo!" "We finally have it, the victory proclamation!" "Our Tiger-san's Number Ooooone!" .....The men, amassing tears even, popped their party poppers and threw out confetti. During the applause and shouting and jubilation, for some reason, a

chorus of "We are the champions...." began spontaneously. Then, they split up and lined up at both sides of the hallway, folded their arms up high, and made a runway for sending Taiga to the classroom with a hot Tiger cheer. Angel Taiga generously nodded, answering to the frenzied call, and proceeded down the runway rapidly. Despite being patted hard on the shoulder and the back with male force while being told, " Keep putting up the good fight!" "Tiger-san rules!" etc., it did not distill the good-humored smile on her rose-like lips. In some cases, someone thrusting his face forward and asking her to hit him would be knocked away with a full-force slap, further increasing the cheers.

What the..... Ryuuji was taken aback, but at that time, someone yelled "Takasu-kun, you go too!" and pushed his back down the runway. Unable to turn back now, he managed to put both hands on Taiga's shoulders and followed her from behind. The two of them wound up walking enveloped by the Tiger cheer and low chorus, as if they were a wrestler and a manager entering a ring. Still, he could say this was fun in a way – but that would be an utter lie. He didn't like it.

"Y, you..... are you okay with this!?"

"Nua, ha ha ha ha ha! It's great! I didn't think so many fans would be awaiting my return! I'm glad I didn't quit school on impulse!"

"Tiger-san! Hit me too!"

"Why certainly!"

Whip! Out went one more sharp slap. The receiving person rubbed his swollen cheek and suddenly rolled over on the floor. He had a very happy mug on his face, but to Ryuuji, he didn't have time to be encircled by the excitement of these men any further.

"We have something more important to do, remember!? Let's ditch these guys and get to the classroom quickly!"

"Ah, okay, okay, I know."

Still coupled together like linked cars, Taiga and Ryuuji sped up and exited the musky and male-stinking runway to head to 2-C with applause at their backs.

What was bothering him should be the same for her too. Minori wasn't waiting at the usual spot. Even when it was the commemorative day of Taiga's return to school. Even when, although they almost didn't make it, they

arrived on time. They didn't even get a message from her about going ahead. This was the first time this had ever happened. Maybe Minori was at home, sick today, or,

"The trembling tendon~....."

While Ryuuji was worrying about that, it happened the moment he opened the classroom door. A high-toned open throat voice suddenly poured out.

"Of a taut~thigh~....."

"....Wha, what the!?"

It was Kushieda Minori.

Grass in mouth and sitting on top of someone's desk.

With cheeks red from the cold wind, a blue pea coat on top of her uniform, a Tartan check muffler around her, and giving off the air that she just arrived, she sang with a Castrato voice. In her eyes was an ancient forest. Ryuuji was struck speechless, but the one next to him wasn't the sort that would become surprised by this level of mysteriousness after all the time she's been with her.

"Minoriiin! I'm back! So please stop that weird song and glomp!"

Clung onto by a leaping glomp, Minori lost her balance and was about to tumble off the desk. She was able to recover her footing just in time, and said,

"Fugu..... Free me! I am human!"

"Minorinminorinmiinoriinu!"

"Live! You are human too!"

"I love you Minorin! Fuga!"

"Ah, it can't be stopped.....! Minorin loves you too!"

Staggering, Minori firmly embraced Taiga, the attention-wanting human disaster. Rubbing her nose against Taiga's hair swirl, she ruffled her hair until it was a mess and cuddled her like crazy. Incidentally, Taiga was wearing a grey duffle coat and black winter tights (the real 100 denier deal) and today, instead of stealing Ryuuji's muffler, covered her neck by shoving her long hair inside her coat.

"Oh, Minorin! I weally, weally, missed youuuuuu!"

Taiga buried her face at the back of Minori's neck and pressed forward with her forehead while, for all intents and purposes, wailing. Stopping all of it with her chin, Minori kiss-stamped Taiga's forehead.

"Theeere, there, there! Taiga's current intelligence is at the Rei-san class! And by Rei, I'm not talking about the Ayanami one you know? I mean the giant space bull! Moo!"

"What, I don't get it! More importantly, why didn't you come with us this morning!"

"Oh that, well, the truth is that I was late this morning, so then I panicked and dashed, and that's why my thigh's stiff..... wait a sec, how did I get to the classroom before you guys when I was the one that was late!?"

He hid his nervousness with a cough and had been waiting for this moment. Takasu Ryuuji! One step forward! Prepare to fire! 3, 2, 1..... Fire!

"O, ou, we were surrounded by some strange guys and ,"

"Shut up, boy!"

Instant death!

.....That was, well... a metaphor, but still, Ryuuji died. Carved in his chest were the letters, S, H, O, C, K. He thought that he had seen the afterlife. He was told to shut up. That always cheerful and kind Minori bared her fangs at him and told him to shut up with a Miwa voice..... She hates him..... The spark of life was disappearing from Ryuuji's face. His soul was rising up to heaven. Witnessing this while still latching on to Minori, Taiga let out a "Pfffft!" stifled laugh.

The one that was in a flurry was Minori.

"O.....oh!? Did I just say something!? Was it..... my gag (choice)!? I messed up (I think)! I screwed up!? Oh no (sorry)! Forget it (pretty please)! Aaaah..... if only..... I wasn't such an idiot..... ah?"

While trembling, she sung, tensed her face, and then suddenly said,

"No, wait a sec!? This might be a good thing!?"

Flash.....! Her face lit up and she left the past behind her.

"See! Because I made such a mistake, I must show that I am repentant! Yes, yes, that's right, thanks to this mistake I made, see! Ah! How lucky I am! Because I can use the favorite item that I'm carrying around fair and square in this very way! This is too lucky!"

Taiga was pushed off and fell onto the floor. Ignoring her, Minori took out a bald wig from her bag. Then, she put it on.

"See! See how lucky this is! Yes, I'm swoo lucky! I wuz able to put this on naturally! I'm swoo fwortunate I can't belieeeeeeeeve it uwaaaaan!"

She cried.

Wearing the bald wig, she fell down onto the floor, coat still on, threw aside her back, and suddenly cried manly tears, yelling, *uooooooooooon, I'm dwone for!* and such.

"Mi.....Minorin!? What's wrong!?"

"Hey, Kushieda! Anyway, get up, the floor's dirty!"

Not only Taiga and Ryuuji, but even the mob gathered around, murmuring, *did Kushieda go nuts again*.

"Yo, Takasu! Oh, hey, Taiga, long time no see, Taiga! Kushieda, what are you doing?"

"Whoa, it's Taiga! How are you!? Did Kushieda break apart again?"

Noto and Haruta also came over and patted Ryuuji on the shoulder, while looking down at the mad Minori.

"I really should have my hair shaved," said Minori as she crouched on the cold floor and held her head. She finally lifted her head up, sniffed, and screamed out in abandon while her face was still a seriously tear-ridden mess.

"Ah, I'm glad I had the bald wig with me! I'll be making good use of this for a while!"

There – she was still wearing the bald wig, for a while. For the duration of her flowery high school life, her limited youth.

Not knowing in what way and exactly how he should be playing the straight man, Ryuuji was dumbfounded and speechless. Taiga, in her own way, was shaken apparently and jutted her jaw out, producing sounds like *au, au~*. The best she could do was murmur, *stop.....*

"No, no, no... actually....."

Making a strangely feebly decrepit voice, Minori sniffled, knit her brows, and twirled her finger on the bald wig. To Ryuuji, that gesture was kind of cu-..... no, cute.... it was not. He wanted her to stop wearing the bald wig at least.

"Actually see, I, yesterday, in a softball match, made an unbelievably, fatally stupid mistake, and because of that, we lost to a team we should have been able to win against..... miserably."

Judging from the length of the long *siiiiigh.....*, it was easy to understand the depth of her melancholy.

"So anyway, I'm actually in a very bad, bad state. I brooded about it yesterday, and ended up almost not getting any sleep at all..... ugh, cough, cough..... I'm starting to lose my voice..... forgive me, it was the day that Taiga returned to school too..... I wanted to

organize an event, but I'd only cause trouble because of my health..... cough, cough! Gasp, it's bloooood~!"

Neither Ryuuji nor Taiga could say anything to a suddenly elderly Minori. By the way, she wasn't bleeding .

The usual Minori would have prepared some blood for the gag. Ryuuji watched Minori unsteadily walk back to her own seat and regretted that he couldn't say anything at all.

He couldn't say anything to Minori even though she was depressed. Then immediately after that, he regretted that he even had that thought. What a self-centered way of thinking. Wasn't "he couldn't say anything" regretting that he couldn't show the appeal of his own kindness to Minori? His own, huh. Showing himself off was more important than a hurt Minori, was it?

No, he really, for pure reasons, wanted to cheer up Minori, but no matter how much he told himself that, ultimately, it was probably just that. It was probably that he couldn't impose himself on Minori while she was down. – And thinking such thoughts gloomily for three seconds round and round, Ryuuji sighed. He was the

same as Taiga. He was trapped by the idea that it wasn't fair to do anything just because the other person's weakened and couldn't move. In the end, he turned into a cold-hearted bastard that couldn't do anything for the person he loved when she needed cheering up.

– This was over-thinking. Both him and Taiga. Two of a kind non-acting thinkers. No, no, this isn't good enough.

Scratching his head and rubbing his eyes, Ryuuji stretched his back and was ready to act. Who cares if it isn't fair, so what if it's taking advantage of her when she's weak, so what if it is a bald wig? The trembling in his heart was real.

He walked over to Minori's seat and casually went into action.

"......Ah....."

"Because. It'll get sweaty."

He removed her bald wig.

No matter what unconscious motives were hidden inside his own actions, he still wanted to tell her that he

was worried about her. He felt that he should tell her just that. For now, he pretended not to notice the parts about "showing off," or "taking advantage of," or "being unfair." But, he didn't want to feel regret for "overlooking someone else's wounds," ever again. He walked over to her because that feeling was inside him.

Minori, for one moment, looked up at Ryuuji as if looking at a terribly bright object and blinked. Their eyes met, he thought.

Ryuuji hid his nervousness and tried to awkwardly smile.

Then – Minori averted her eyes away from Ryuuji. She took back the bald wig from Ryuuji without looking at his face, and with a laugh, said, "Hehehe, dat's right. Don't have to wear da wig." She smiled, and without changing her expression, closed her mouth. He noticed the oddness of this for one slight moment, but then,

"Aaaaaaaaaaisaaaaaakaaaaaaaa!"

He virtually jumped up because of the echoing scream. When he looked back,

"Oh, Aisaka! You're finally able to come back to school, eh. Congratulations! How long the two weeks you were away were..... It's been extremely dull, I mean it!"

The new Student Council President, Kitamura Yuusaku, was face flat on the floor. Basically, he was lying, at attention, on the floor. This was his best friend? Ryuuji became slightly dizzied by the sight.

"Aaaaaaa Ki-ki-ki-ki-kitamura-kun, good mor-mor-mor-morning."

Taiga rigidly gestured with her right hand in the direction of the floor.

"Good morning! Oh, it's been a while since we've greeted each other like this! .....I am moved beyond words!"

Kitamura, still flat on the floor, lifted up his refreshing smile with the nape of his neck. Then, he also became aware of Ryuuji's presence.

"Oh, good morning Takasu!"

".....Why!?"

"Because it's morning isn't it!"

"No! Why that pose!?"

"A kneeling bow isn't enough! A kneeling bow isn't good enough to show how I feel towards Aisaka! .....Hey , Aisaka. I'm sorry I caused you to get suspended, something that could ruin your life. And, thank you. After that big embarrassment, I thought I couldn't take being in this school. But, thanks to you, Aisaka, I'm still here. I've.... started my Student Council President responsibilities without problems."

Flat on the floor, Kitamura looked up at Taiga directly with a gentle smile and beaming lens-covered eyes.

"If there's anything I can do, I will do anything. So please, don't ever fight again. For anyone's sake either. No matter how right you may be. If there's something you can't forgive, first, talk to me."

Then Taiga,

"...Aaaan....."

Fainted.

"Ou! Hang in there Taiga! It's only a flesh wound!"

Ryuuji hastily caught Taiga from behind and hit her cheeks. Kitamura's loyalty was too powerful. He confirmed slight movement from her eyelashes as she moaned, "Ugh, ugh." Okay, she's alive.

"Breathe slowly..... that's right..... relax....."

"Su.....haaa.....suu.....haa....."

Ryuuji sat with one knee up to support Taiga and desperately rubbed her shoulders to get her back to her senses. And then it happened.

"....!?"

He felt stares at his back for sure. Not one, but multiple. He turned around like a killer attempting to hunt all the life forms on the Earth singlehandedly, but

"....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....." "....."

There was only a string of multiple cases of silence, multiple backs of heads, and multiple backs. Whaat, just his imagination! Of course not. Ryuuji's brows furrowed. What is this?

Almost everyone in the class simultaneously became silent and faced directions away from Ryuuji, Taiga, and Kitamura. There was no way this could be normal. Even Noto and Haruta's eyes were wandering the other way. Without saying anything at all, either.

This was..... b-u-l-l-y-i-n-g..... At almost the same the time those ghastly letters floated in his mind, a far too care-free Kitamura said,

"So, anyway, I've started the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts service!"

Bang! This time, Taiga fell off of Ryuuji's lap from this incomprehensible situation. Had this been news that Ryuuji had heard the first time, he would have liked to fall over with Taiga. But that wasn't the case – Yes, Kitamura had begun it. The Great Illuminator Deity. It was too idiotic and not so easy to explain to Taiga while

she was suspended, so he put it off until today. But just at that time, someone knocked on the door of the classroom.

"Um, excuse me..... is the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts....."

"Hi! Over here, over here!"

Kitamura smoothly got up from the floor and energetically gestured to the girl – an underclassman probably – that was peeking at the pre-homeroom classroom from the entrance. The girl fidgeted while walking towards him. While looking at the girl's back, Taiga was in a virtual panic.

"Begun.... the Great Illuminator Deity..... service? It's not as if he's selling cold-served Chinese food, and... and, what the, what the!? That biiiiiitch! The nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nerve of her!"

Trembling, Taiga bared her fangs and even now was dripping blood red murderous intent from her eyes like she was going to eat that girl, but. "......Whoops! Must stop, must stop, be a good girl, be a good girl.....," she said, head shaking frantically, and bit her lips. Only her eyes didn't separate themselves from their two figures.

The girl, whose life was unknowingly spared thanks to Good Girl Week, reverently drooped her head in front of Kitamura and said, ".....I don't have the courage to confess..... Please help....." Then Kitamura, the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, replied,

"Hm, hm..... it's fine, your prayers will be answered as long as you believe! Go forth without doubting yourself!"

"But..... I don't have any confidence in myself..... I'm not pretty either....."

"Don't think! Go to a Soap!"

".....Soa....? .....What?"

"Don't think too much."

Then, Kitamura chanted some mumbo jumbo over her head and bowed. The girl also bowed and left. ".....Haa... ...?" Taiga said, slanting her neck so much that her face turned. She could not comprehend the situation at all

That's right. A lot had happened in school while Taiga was suspended.

"What is this, Ryuuji, what's....."

"....The truth is, ever since the 'big confession', Kitamura's turned into the sect founder of love within the school – or more like, he's turned into an object of worship for those people that have someone they want to confess to....."

"Oh, really?!" exclaimed Taiga in surprise, but immediately after,

"But he was turned down!"

How true. Coming from Taiga, the mechanisms of her petite brain did their job quite well, remarkably.

"That's the reason why. Like 'Kitamura will be taking all the bad stuff'."

"In other words, it's evil spirit exorcism."

Noto popped his head out and followed up with the rest of the explanation.

"Well, it's also because the previous Student Council President had too strong a personality, you know? This also carries the meaning of adding flavor to the new

Student Council, and that's why he's going out of his way to promote the ‘Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts' . This was the second person this morning. After school's just wow; they actually make lines at the Student Council . The Student Council's getting carried away too and they've got a shrine at the entrance, like they're really going to do the Great Illuminator Deity act."

"Really!? So that's what it was about, I didn't know! Isn't Kitamura amazing~!?"

The one that had spoken up was Haruta, who was then given a cold chide of, "May I ask you what of Kitamura you've been looking at the whole time?" from Noto. Completely ignoring Haruta, Taiga quietly looked at the returning Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts with a hard-to-read expression. Looking at the side of her face,

".....Shall we try it?"

After Ryuuji whispered this, she nodded slightly with a "Yeah," and Taiga and Ryuuji both discreetly put their hands together in prayer. They lowered their heads slightly to the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts. What they were thinking was, of course –

"What, what, you guys too? Is there somebody you want to confess to?"

"Ou, you found out. .....No, but somehow it felt like the thing to do."

".....Same. Somehow or another."

"All right! Go to a Soap!"

Don't think so..... thought Ryuuji as he averted his eyes slightly, whereas Taiga lightly scratched the area under her nose. Noto, comparing their two faces, then suddenly said,

"You know, Taiga, you're awfully quiet today.....? You're keeping a low profile because it's the first day back from suspension, something like that?"

To that question, which he asked carefully while keeping a tab on the distance, she replied,

"Ah, you noticed? That's right, I'm, being a good girl."

"Eh he!" laughed Taiga, with generous sweetness to the likes of Noto. Noto as well, either surprised or scared, jolted grandly, knocking his glasses askew.

"See, I've decided to be a good girl since it's almost Christmas. Because, see, Santa's watching..... doee!"

Then, adorable Taiga was sent flying forward. She plowed down desks and chairs, taking with her several others including Noto and tumbled onto the floor exposing her tights-covered butt.

"Kyaahahahahaha Are you stupid~!? Santa! You said Santa! To think I'd hear you say that~! It doesn't, fit, you! Kyahahahahaha ! Oh yeah, it has been a while hasn't it~! Suspended! That kills me~!"

He knew who it was without having to look.

The name of the beautiful girl that knocked Taiga's butt with her bag and laughed loudly while brushing upwards her silky hair was Kawashima Ami. The undisputed, perfect, super beauty.

Despite having the shapely, well-proportioned figure of a model, despite overly perfect features properly settling in at the perfect positions on her small face, and despite radiating the brilliant and smooth aura of a jewel from everywhere while walking towards Taiga, Ami was an overwhelming social miscreant. To Taiga, the sole

owner of the title of the most vicious and strongest being in the school, she could indeed be said to be her archenemy. If she was knocked away on the butt by that Ami, naturally, it should be Taiga's turn to pay her back. But.

"........Long time no see, Bakachi....."

"......Ooh?"

Taiga, who had been sent flying and knocking over desks, however, got up and greeted Ami. It was too much to expect her to smile, but even so, she waved her hand amicably. But from her sleeves, the tip of a sharp knife was...! No, that didn't happen. But between her fingers, a poison needle was...! No, that didn't happen. In her pointed shoes, a frog was...! No. From above, a metal basin was...! No.

Taiga remained elegant and graceful.

"Bakachi, it's almost Christmas. If you still keep being a bad Chihuahua, Santa won't be coming to see you. See, I'll make a concession. I'll take that blow as a greeting and forget about it. So, let's stop fighting until Christmas

is over. I, love Christmas. I don't want to fight over something stupid in this once-in-a-year wonderful season."

"Kyaa!"

.....With one hand held by Taiga, Ami shrieked. Quite a reaction. Ami desperately knocked off Taiga's extended hand. She looked at her right hand, screaming as if it were decaying, shook it violently, and then finally opened her eyes like something would come spilling out.

"You, there is so something wrong with you! Did something happen while you were suspended!? You're abnormal, abnormal, abnormal, you're strange! Ah, maybe that's it!? You're going to die tomorrow!? Ugh, how awful~!"

".....You're saying the same thing Ryuuji did..... Why does everyone say I'm sick, that I'm dying, when I decide that I'll be a good girl. I don't understand at all. It's almost Christmas. Bakachi, I think it's a good idea to change your ways. Because Santa, see, will be in Japan's skies soo-....."

"Noooooooooo!"

Ami's serious scream rumbled throughout the classroom. Also, while she was at it, it climaxed at the " Oeee!" vomiting kind of sound.

"What, Santa, are you for real!? Gross, gross, gross, gross, actually, kyaah, I got it! You've got your sights set on using this opportunity to get a personality makeover!? Uwaa, that's creepy, no, stop shitting me, gargh! There's no room for one more in the airhead or pure slots, dammit! Actually, I was planning on saying *'Ami-chan, loves Christmas~ ♥ Ehehe, I believed in Santa up to Junior High~ ♥ Isn't that stupid~ ♥,'* but because of you, it's all pointless, dammit, how are you going to take responsibility for this, bitch!? Aaah!? Dammit, this is freaking me out. You made me dilate my pupils, you idiot!"

Not giving the time of the day to the several boys clinging to her highness' legs – *It's okay; We like that fake pureness of Ami-chan; We love Ami-chan's real, occasionally overflowing, ferocious feelings; Whip me, hang me, tie me, turn my life into a mess*– she said,

"Hah! .....Oh. Ami-chan's figured it out!"

Ami suddenly raised her face and gulped. Then, continued,

"You're on speed....."

"That's it, that's it, it's speed, it's speed! Oh no, that's totally frea~ky! It has to be that! Gasp, eek, oh no! My heavens~!"

She apparently satisfied herself with her own theory. She wriggled her body, moistened her large eyes, put both hands to her cheeks, and META FUSED her cutie pie iron mask! It was a facial transformation, as expected of a pro, with more years of seasoning than Taiga's "good girl."

"Quit it! Of course not. Ah, wait, Bakachi!"

"As such, anyway, Ami-chan will inspect your belongings ♥ You're, totally, totally, suspicious. Let's see, let's see....."

Ami picked up Taiga's bag from the floor and opened it all the way, hard. However, for a joke, the way her hands were moving were too rough, and,

"Oh dear, whoopsidoo!"

"Ah! What are you doing Bakachi! Why you, I'll k-...I won't kill you."

Everything in Taiga's bag became scattered on the floor. Ami panicked, then squatted on the floor and began picking up the mess. Ryuuji couldn't prevent himself from not helping upon seeing this horrible mess.

"What the hell are you doing? .....So to get to the point, you're happy that Taiga, your quarrel partner, is back at school, aren't you? Be honest."

"Oh, Takasu-kun, good-mor-ning ♥ Stop with the gross jokes, I'll-kill-you ♥ By the way, could you pick that up ~?"

With the smile of an angel, Ami forced Ryuuji to fetch a pen that had rolled all the way against the wall. Then, with the bag back in its original state, she passed it back to Taiga, then added,

"Ah, this one too. I'll put this here."

To finish things off, Ami slipped Taiga's student handbook in the back pocket of the bag. She muttered, "

Good grief," but then forced a smile, saying to herself, " Stop, stop, must be a good girl, a good girl.....," and took the bag from Ami. Then, Ami's hair was touched from behind.

"My..... I knew it, Ami-chan, really is kind....."

The one whispering this with a bit of a wry smile was Kashii Nanako, who had come to school with her.

"What~? What might you be talking about~? Ah, that reminds me, I brought that limited edition lip gloss? Nanako, do you want to put it on? Oh that's right, that's right, Maya also said she wanted to try it ♥ Let's go, let's go."

"Ah, I want to try it, I want to try it! Maya, come on!"

Kihara was gestured over by the two of them, however , on the way there, "Hah? Kushieda, why do you have the bald wig? That's a riot!" "Dyou want to wear it? Dyo you want it?" "By the way, why is your voice all nasally? That's a riot!" "I just cried." "Why did you cry? That's a real riot!"

She was having a lot of small laughs at Minori's seat on the way over. Tugging Maya's arm, the usual trio

moved to Ami's seat. Clamoring nosily, the sweet, voices of the 2-C Official Beautiful Trio echoed gorgeously, as usual, in the pre-homeroom classroom.

Chapter 2

".....Then, when I asked my date, the Associated Professor, 'Where are you now?', he said, 'I'm in the café at the station front'. Then he said, 'There's a file I have to read up on all of a sudden, so could you push back the time we're meeting?' But, I was at that café when he called.....I thought this was strange, and I asked him, I asked him casually, 'Did you get a good window seat?' to which he replied, 'Yes, I got one.' He said, 'I' m sitting in a good window seat, ah ha ha.' .....But, at that time, I was sitting in the only window seat....."

"Oh ho. A strange lie from out of nowhere. That's quite bad. "

"I thought that he was meeting some other woman, I mean wouldn't you? But, we're not officially dating, so I couldn't confront him. .....I thought he was a promising candidate, and the fact is we're both not young. He might have to terminate a few relationships before we could formally begin dating each other, I thought. He said that he would be one hour late, so I didn't think it was a good idea to hang around there."

"I see, you didn't want him to know that you knew he was lying."

"Yes. We hadn't even reached the point where we could argue with each other. So, for the moment, I left the station-side building while it was raining. I could kill time browsing at a bookstore or a clothing store for one hour, I thought. It was on that terribly cold Saturday....."

"Yeah, it sure was a cold day. It didn't snow one bit either, just cold rain."

"Yes. So, since my umbrella was small, my clothing and shoes got wet, and there I was, walking and thinking, 'Oh what should I do~'..... And then, I found him.....!"

"Oh ho! Where was he and what was he doing?"

"He was playing with a pachinko slot machine!"

Aaah.....

Low rumbling gathered inside 2-C. This dubious twist brought the hands of students eating their lunch to an automatic stop.

"This is..... quite the story. When he should have been reading files in a café, he was playing pachinko. Even when he was missing an appointment. Even when he was standing up the person he's dating."

"This was definitely a bit too much.....I thought. There's a limit to how much I can pretend to be oblivious. I didn't want to hear excuses, I didn't want to hear lies either, so then I decided to wait for him to exit the building at that spot."

"You didn't storm the building?"

"I wouldn't do that, I'm an adult. I simply stood in the rain. But he didn't leave the building. He didn't leave the building even after one hour. I still stood there. With no roof cover. At 8 :00 at night. On the street. He didn't come out after another 30 minutes passed. 'Isn't he an hour late?' I thought. 'You don't have the decency to even call,' I thought. 'No, in the first place, are pachinko slot machines > me?' I thought. ..... But, the blackness inside me grew as big as the amount of time I waited, and I was too frustrated and sad to return home.....Even worse , it was cold, and I was pitiful and miserable the colder it was, then I thought if he looked at how pitiful I was, he might regret what he did....."

".....Hmmm.....Didn't you make a phone call or send an email?"

"I did. .....To a friend. 'Right now, I'm crying because of what that Associated Professor was putting me through, what

should I do~?' I said to her. Then, I realized something major... ...”

“My hands are sweating with anticipation.”

“There is apparently no such thing as the occupation of Associated Professor.....They call the profession Associate Professor now. ..... Then I started wondering, 'Who the hell are you?'”

“.....Oh. So his whole story became fishy.”

“I haven't been in contact with him since then. Then, the reason why everything turned weird is, well, I discovered what it was. .....Mercury, you see, had been retrograding.....”

“Ah.....Mercury, you say.....”

“Yes, Mercury! They say that when Mercury retrogrades, computers will break and plans will get delayed! When it eventually moves normally again, ah, at the beginning of next year I think, he'll contact me again! Don't you think so? You think so, right!”

“Er.....Hmmmm, well, that boyfriend is, to be honest..... Isn't it a good idea to go see him the next time?”

"If there's a next time, of course I'll go dammit!! But it's not that! It's not that. A-n-y-w-a-y, I, wanted to complain! Yes!"

"Ah, ah, uwaaa.....if you strain yourself that much, you'll hyperventi....."

"But!? He came out from the pachinko parlor!? He saw me! ? He wasn't surprised or nervous, and the first thing that came out of that lousy sob's mouth was, 'You were following me weren't you!? So that's the kind of person you are! You're scum! It's because you do things like this that you're still single at this age!' Excuse me, but I was the one that wanted to say that!? You're the one that's still playing bachelor upper-level occupation fraud at your age! 'What you say!' pant , pant..... Shimura.... Aaaaa..... uuuuu~ooooooo....."

"Well then, having gotten to the point of the story, I sure hope Mercury does turn direct soon. That's it for today, thank you very much. Here, take these tissues..... You still have classes in the afternoon. You should wipe off your tears and fix your makeup.....uh, Radio Name B-rette (30)-san"

".....Y-chan."

"Excuse me. Y-chan (30). If you want help, please tell us your story on the "Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts

Restaurant" corner. – The Student Council is the cheer squad of your love. .....Now, we'll be playing Y-chan (30)'s request, so listen up folks....."

Powdeeeerrr~~~~~~~~snoooooowv!

A somewhat nostalgic winter song flowed out from the speakers. Finally, somebody hit the nail on the head.

"What does Kitamura hope to accomplish by making our homeroom teacher cry....."

Ever since Kitamura awakened as the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, the broadcast room at lunch was occupied by the Student Council. What was ceaselessly leaking out from the speakers was the Student Council's voluntary school broadcast, the "Cheer Squad of Your Love." Procuring them from somewhere, students would be subjected to love counseling anonymously, Kitamura would suddenly go running off on his experiences, and today, on the matter of lack of romantic relationships, they succeeded in summoning the friendly neighborhood 2-C homeroom teacher, K.gakubo Y.ri (30 – D-shin) as a corner guest. The pain grade of the show increased daily. As if to agree with that,

".....Let's pretend we didn't know that was Yuri-chan."

".....Yeah."

Thus the boys and girls at this delicate period of their lives grew steadily into adults. Meanwhile,

"Hey, hey, Ryuuji.....Don't you think the master tape for this broadcast is saved somewhere? If we know where it is, we can sneak inside at night, take it, and edit the Kitamura-kun parts....and then every night, before I sleep....n, fu-....."

There also was somebody whose large eyes were lit with fiery desire, nose flaring with harsh breathing, and was hugging her own body and raising her body temperature to steaming. Opposite to her and opening his boxed lunch, Ryuuji cried out, "It's out, it's out." He wasn't smiling at the new power he developed – "It's out , it's out, cursed, poisonous smoke is gushing out from my eyes." He was rolling his eyes at the emergence of a ridiculous idea from the person in front of him.

"Weren't you supposed to be a 'good girl' until Christmas? I can't believe you're thinking about stealing . .....Your eyes are black with self-interest."

"Oh my, what an awful thing to say."

Taiga clasped her two hands before her chest and leisurely brought down her long eyelashes.

"If I really think about it, I believe the one at fault here is Ryuuji for not telling me about this wonderful lunch hour broadcast and not recording it."

".....If I told you, you'd want to listen to it. I'd look like a moron if I recorded this in class. Hey, I was trying to be considerate since it'd actually be cruel to tell you while you were on suspension."

"Oh, no, no, you don't understand at all, Ryuuji. Your way of being considerate is totally, and completely, missing the point. That habit of yours is self-satisfaction like the type you get after doing something good and complete self-righteousness. Your personality, is like an old man that's pouring sugar on top of a slug then in the time that he's watching it melt, the sun comes down, but he still goes, 'it was a good day, wasn't it!' While I'm at it , even your mug is missing the point; and it's a Yakuza mug with your canine spirit showing. But in spite of your faults, Ryuuji, the current me won't hold that against you . I won't hit you or kick you. I won't throw you, strangle

you, or drop you on the ground either. I won't say you're worthless. Aren't you amazed by this good girl demonstration? Ehee."

"That's more than enough, so cut it out!"

Ryuuji sadly dropped his chopsticks. My personality's like sugar on a slug.....! Aaaaah! thought Ryuuji, but ignoring him, Taiga puffed up her hair with a small sigh.

"It really is too bad though. Well..... breaking in and stealing it is certainly iffy, isn't it? But, all I wanted to do was somehow get possession of Kitamura-kun's beautiful voice that I had missed out on while I was suspended, edit it as much as I please, customize here and there to fit my tastes, and fill both of my ears with a Kitamura-kun voice that belongs only to me....."

Then, there was a pat on Taiga's shoulder.

"Tiger, if you want, I could give this to you?"

Thinking that this very embarrassing conversation was overheard, Taiga flipped around. Ryuuji was also quite surprised. The ones who talked to Taiga were girls that normally didn't talk to her. They handed out one ROM to Taiga.

"I'm in the broadcast committee. I was asked by Maruo, so I've been recording the lunch hour broadcasts everyday. This has all the broadcasts up to yesterday, and if you like, I'll give it to you."

Ryuuji and Taiga looked at each other automatically and stopped thinking for several seconds.

"Eh, wha, wha.....eh? Wh, why.....?"

The answer to the question that finally came out from Taiga's mouth was simple.

"Well, I kind of, by coincidence, just heard you saying you wanted to hear it. And, I just happened to have a spare backup ROM with me. Right?"

"Oh yes, right, right. We also recorded today's of course, and we plan on continuing, so if you want, I'll make a copy. It's interesting. It's really funny too."

The ROM was pushed into Taiga' s small, hesitant, shaking hand with a "Here." Taiga's cheeks turned red, and she stood up, knocking over her chair in a panic with her legs.

"Um, um, um,"

She looked back to Ryuuji for only a moment as if to ask him what to do. Prodded by Ryuuji's hand which seemed to be saying, go on,

"Th.....thank you....."

Fidgeting, Taiga finally managed to quietly whisper this while blushing greatly. The girls laughed, and waving their hands, they said,

"Don't worry about it. Think of it as a gift to celebrate the end of your suspension."

"Yeah, yeah. School's dull without Tiger around. I'm glad you're back."

They returned to their own seats where their boxed lunches were opened. Taiga was frozen still for a short time then abruptly nodded as if she came to a decision on something. She took out a box of sweets from the inside of her desk, caught up with the girls, and held it out to them.

".....n!"

She said.

"Aah, thank you! This tastes good, doesn't it?"

"I like this too! I'll take one."

Flaring her nostrils, she returned to Ryuuji's seat and then jumped at the desk with an "Nfa!" grunt. While hugging the ROM and closing both eyes, her face became completely red with even the back of her neck turning a hot cherry pink.

"D-d-did you see that just now!? Is it really okay for me to be this lucky!? I'm too happy!"

While shouting with a small voice, she wildly stomped her feet up and down on Ryuuji's from under the desk. This was, by the way, not an attack, but something like how a delighted cat tries to make her owner turn by poking him with her nose. Ryuuji couldn't help but smile .

"Yeah, that was pretty lucky. You're surprisingly loved by the girls, aren't you? Maybe it's a blessing from the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts? At any rate , you don't have to steal."

"Yeah!"

Taiga stuffed her mouth with lettuce chahan which was served with a nice helping of petite tomatoes. Directly facing her, Ryuuji also stuffed his mouth with the same boxed lunch meal. The quality, of course, was excellent as usual. It was made up of the acid taste of tomato and fresh lettuce, a full serving of one egg for one person, and canned scallop eye as its trump card. Accompanying it on the side, was a sauté of zha cai, pepper, and chicken breast, as well as a salad of special sesame-sprinkled cucumbers and seaweed, and for dessert, there was tangerine jelly. Today's lunch was superb. Since it was the first day of the end of Taiga's suspension, Ryuuji also put a little energy into making it.

However, during this precious lunchtime, Minori was away from the classroom because of a club meeting, and that one point alone was too much of a shame.

"Yippy, yippy, yippy! Ehehe."

Taiga, munching on the chahan while frolicking in delight, had lit her eyes up like she was happy to the bottom of her heart, so he figured he'd look at her face to comfort the boredom. Then,

"I finally bought bread! It's too crowded at the school store!"

"Oh hey, the Kitamura radio's on again today? Oh man, this song's way old."

"Don't say that. It's our homeroom teacher's selection."

"Geh, that's kind of sad."

Noto and Haruta, the bread purchasers, pulled their chairs close to Ryuuji's desk. With two desks, three guys, and a little one sticking to the edge by herself, it was extremely cramped, but this was, in its own way, a fun moment in the day.

"Powdeeeerrr~~~~~~~~snoooooooww! *finally ended, and once again, Kitamura's slightly artificial facetious voice began to stream from the speakers.*

".....Well then, today's high temperature is 8 degrees and low is 3 degrees. We're in the middle of winter. The wind's cold, the air is dry.....It's frightening isn't it, influenza, accidental fires....."

Shaddup, Noto mocked while biting into his bread, and *ahaha*, laughed Ryuuji and Haruta. Taiga strained her ears and extended her head out like a turtle to greedily listen to Kitamura's voice.

"Speaking of scary things, it's almost time for the semester finals. Folks, how's your studying coming along? By the way, I , the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, also would like to get down to studying soon but.....Ah ha! Things just won't go according to schedule."

"What did he say~!?"

Haruta suddenly shouted.

"Isn't this broadcast irritating|!? Why does he have to start talking about exam studying!? Isn't the title 'Cheer Squad of Love'!?"

"Whoah, whoah, calm down. Why are you getting worked up? We can't hear the Great Kitamura-sensei's good broadcast, right Tiger? Are you okay? Can you hear it?"

Noto turned to Taiga, and Taiga, creasing her brows, nodded. Noto and Taiga's relationship was kind of good,

almost as if they were normal friends? Damn Noto, don't get full of yourself just because Taiga's in her Christmas mode.....er, no, he musn't think like that. Ryuuji's eyes flashed manically as if to say oh, what a heartwarming scene, but Haruta stubbornly continued to shake his head with a "Naw, naw.' In spite of laughing just a little earlier , he violently bit off a portion of his yakisoba bread, annoyingly swung his long hair, and said,

"I don't want to hear about studying! Don't you feel the same too Noto!? Takacchan's the same right!? Tiger, you too!? Hey, I, hate studying! It might be surprising to you, but honestly, I don't want to study for even a second!"

"Ou! You spit blue seaweed on my desk..... I have to take out my antibacterial wet tissues....."

"This isn't the time to be wiping blue seaweed, Takacchan! Stop it! By the way, what's up with you Tiger !?"

Haruta's anger was abruptly directed at Taiga. Under normal circumstances, Haruta would be sent to the gallows, die in 2 seconds, go to heaven in 5, then reincarnate 10 seconds after, and be wailing, "Ogyaa!" in

a new world. However, the pre-Christmas Taiga, somewhat miserably replied,

"……What is wrong with me……"

She simply looked up at the long haired idiot. The person in this world that should be thankful to Santa the most is without a doubt Haruta, Ryuuji thought. Then, that idiot got more carried away, pointed his finger at Taiga, showed his teeth with blue seaweed sticking all over,

"So, I had just bought bread, and the Head of our Year shouted, 'You, the idiot over there!' and stopped me, and out of nowhere, I got scolded by him to do exam studying since I'm the guy that's closest to being held back in our grade! So I went, 'But Tiger's on suspension! She's in more trouble than me!' but then he scolded at me some more and said, 'You're in far more trouble than her you idiot! You are the Idiot King!'…… Pfffft! Ah hahahahaha! Doesn't that make you crack up!? Idiot King he said!"

While a further solitary outburst of *ahhahahahaha~!* trailed off, Ryuuji asked Noto "Really?" with his eyes. Noto replied back with a silent nod. What could Taiga be

thinking as she continued to silently look at that Haruta King? Soon, she quietly said,

".....Please, let this idiot also have a happy Christmas.. ...."

She laid her fingers on top of one another and sent her prayers to heaven. And, what resounded inside that holy blessing wasn't the trumpeting of angels, but the "Kyaha. .....!?" voice of Hayashiya Paako ? Nope, it was Haruta 's super sonic wave.

"What's wrong Tiger~!! Ah~ you have a really kind side, don't you! Ah~.....oh oh, I don't really understand, but just now I kind of bla-"

Stab! Noto's surprisingly sharp hand chop was thrust into Haruta's neck in that instant. Haruta dropped into his chair and his head fell. *All right*, nodded Noto, while Ryuuji took away the yakisoba bread from Haruta and put it on the desk.

The two men gave each other the thumbs up sign. Taiga, not understanding what happened, looked with blank eyes at Haruta, shut off from the forced power outage and rice crumbs still sticking to the edges of his mouth. Then, she turned her face to Noto and said,

"What was that just now? What was he trying to say?"

"Don't worry about it, girls needn't worry about it! ..... Oh yeah, more importantly, shouldn't we really start studying soon? Why don't we get together at the family restaurant? And Haruta, especially, isn't going to be able to get into the next grade if we don't force him to study. Also, that thing you have, Takasu. I'd like a copy of that. Is it all right? You know, the Bro Notes."

"Ah, ou, of course. Great stuff. Let's pass it along to the gang. .....Ah, right, it isn't just mine. You should ask Kushieda too."

The Bro Notes. The study notes for all the subjects, left behind by the previous Student President and given to Ryuuji and Minori as the prize for winning the lucky man marathon at the end-of-fall Cultural Festival. Ryuuji was holding on to them but the note books officially belonged to the two of them. He hadn't entered the contest because he wanted them, but when he received and opened them, he was surprised. The class and textbook information was there of course, however, even more complicated information was written in a way unbelievably easy to understand and summarized even more carefully than the study aids on sale in the market.

Seeing this, Ryuuji at last understood. The genius Bro that Kitamura had once been in love with didn't slack off, she put in daily effort in order to further polish her god-given gift. She was the "real deal."

"Thank you! Isn't that great Haruta! Right!" Noto replied to Ryuuji's pleasant answer, rocking the shoulder of his friend. Haruta was still unconscious and Noto's unnecessarily long arm whacked him in the area around his thigh. Then, continuing, Noto turned his head and said,

"But hey, Tiger, it's great that your suspension ended while you can still take the semester finals. The tests are next week too, and Taiga, of course, you'll be studying with us right? See, well, you know. .....I'll mention it to Kitamura too, so how about studying with us? Right? How about we start tonight?"

"…….!"

Taiga's eyes brightened from those words, and she then looked to Ryuuji. As if to say, *Did you hear that!?* He most certainly did hear that. He most certainly heard that Noto said he'll get Kitamura to go to the study session. Taiga somehow suppressed her happy expression, but

her eyes sparkled, her cheeks swelled in pink, and she quietly answered, “I do-do-do-don’t mind,” like she was trying to suppress a smile. Noto laughed and then nodded.

“Oh right, can we ask Minorin to come too!? The note books, they’re Minorin’s too! Right, Ryuuji!”

Taiga was so delighted that it seemed that she’d almost hum, and said “Right!” as she peeked at Ryuuji’s face. If people weren’t watching, he would answer Angel Taiga’s persistent supportive efforts with a salute. ..... However, Ryuuji put that feeling aside and stared at the side of Noto’s face, sensing that something was out of place.

“....Hm? What is it, Takasu?”

“.....Nothing.”

“Huh? If I look real carefully at Takasu’s face, you look like this Joker card I have at home.....”

“....Ou. I’m told that sometimes.”

And Noto somehow looks like a pitiable jer.....but that’s not important. He thought there was definitely

something wrong with the way Noto was acting today. Just because Taiga was in her Christmas only good girl version, just because it's been a while since he last saw her, wasn't he being too straight with Taiga? Then, suddenly inviting her to come over for a study session..... .No, it's not just that. There were several decisively strange points. That's right, Noto for some reason has been,

"Ah, Minorin! Over here! You're late! We already finished eating!"

"!?"

– He popped.

Ryuuji's mind was instantly blown away. The pieces of his scattered ego were drawn together by the figure of one girl and finally reformed themselves into a human shape. A stupid man, one that lost all of his nearly-assembled thought processes and one that was in love, was being reconstructed.

"Sorry, the meeting dragged on!"

She directed her smile at Taiga and strutted forth with a leap-like step. Minori alone rose up with vivid colors and as a bright outline in the familiar, dull landscape. That figure, that voice, that smell, swept away Ryuuji's heart with tremendous power. Looking down, he acted like he was cleaning out the remains of his boxed lunch. He turned away his eyes and pretended not to notice Minori's arrival. He drank his Oolong tea in one gulp to replace what he wanted to say.

"Minorin, did you have a boxed lunch too?"

"I bought bread!"

"Then, come over here and eat some snacks with me!"

"Okay, hee-haw !"

When Taiga waved out the sweets box, Minori, smiling, was about to move her legs to come here, however,

"Um, Minorin, we were talking about it just now, but tonight, we.....Minorin, why are you moving away?"

"Hee-haw, hee-haw, the big thing on my crotch won't stay put, it be , hee-haw."

With an abnormally well-performed moonwalk, she gradually retreated. "Ah, that's dirty talk! Kushieda, you're vulgar!" booed Noto. Ryuuji's face twisted like a poisoned demon, his eyes radiated terrifying lightning, and his fists trembled with the power of a man. A low-pitched voice for finishing off a mortal enemy emerged from his lips. "And you mixed Saigou Don in it." YES! Ryuuji shouted with delight mentally. After a long hiatus, he succeeded in casually pulling off the straight man response. However, Minori,

"Hee-haw, hee-haw, it be, it be."

She didn't stop her laughing reverse moon surface walking. She went back further and further with smooth movements which couldn't possibly be from someone with something sticking between the legs. Even if she bumped into somebody and received a "Hey, watch it!", even if her rear hit someone's desk, Minori did not stop. Just when Taiga, Noto, and Ryuuji were about to ask together how far she was going,

".....By the way. The Christmas you folks have been waiting for is coming up after the painful exams."

A Christmas song began to run as background music accompanying the voice of Kitamura. Realizing this, Ryuuji watched Taiga's face turn into a smile. Her beloved Kitamura began to talk about her beloved Christmas. Of course she'd have a pleasant smile.

"We, the Student Council have an announcement. After the end of the end of semester examinations, there will be a closing ceremony on the 24th, Christmas Eve. And after that, in the gym, we will be holding a student-run Christmas party!"

– At that moment.

The lunch hour clamor came to a halt. Taiga's mouth opened excitedly. Even Haruta regained consciousness and opened his eyes.

This was....this was! Ryuuji stopped breathing. He instinctively exchanged glances with Taiga.

"I don't have to be telling you couples this, but to you .....yes, you, the person that can't ask out that certain someone you're interested in. Why don't you invite that

special someone to this occasion, this romantic holy night of Christmas Eve? We await your cooperation in launching the Preparatory Committee. We also await your funds. The Student Council is the supporter of your love."

Kyaaaaa~! .....Two maidens were explosively born.

This was it. This is what he wanted! This project! Ryuuji and Taiga both lost control of themselves and could no longer utter words. Raising their excited and shrilly voices, they did a double high five, then shrieked again, nearly wrapping their arms around each other.

This way, Ryuuji can naturally ask Minori out. How about going with everybody? That will do it. They'll go to the party together, and the rest is up to the way the wind blew, and the mood.....No, Ryuuji was satisfied with simply enjoying Eve with Minori. Taiga doesn't have to be unnecessarily worried about this and that being fair or not, and as long as she goes to the party, she can meet Kitamura. It might be difficult for the two of them to be alone together, but at any rate, she should be able to spend Eve with Kitamura.

And the ones that turned into hyperactive girls hadn't just been Ryuuji and Taiga. "It's not like I'm going to have anything scheduled for Eve anyway!" "This might be pretty fun!?" "I hope we can wear our own stuff!" "I wanna wear a cute dress!" Several people soon began to announce their participation. If it's the already event-loving denizens of 2-C and the host is the head of 2 -C, the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, there was no way they couldn't get excited.

What a great mood.....Ryuuji tenaciously goggled his reptilian eyes. No, he wasn't being haunted by a snake one of his ancestors killed. His heart couldn't refrain from being happy. From getting riled up with everyone, having a romantic party on the night of Eve.....and then just maybe, just maybe, really, really, being able to even confess his feelings to Minorin. If, if that really happened, what answer would Minori give – Lickings his lips chapped from tension and suppressing his excitement, he was going to turn around in Minori's direction secretly. But,

"Oh right, why don't you join the Preparatory Committee, Taiga?"

"Oh yeah, you did say you liked Christmas just a little while ago~"

"You fit the job description! You should do it, you should really do it!"

Surprising voices began to come up from his surroundings. "Join the Committee!" laughed Noto as well.

Taiga, surrounded by those voices, stood up nervously with her face completely red and announced,

I-i-i-i-if everyone's wants me to do it so badly, I'm willing to do it! Fuhahahahaha!"

She laughed loudly to cover her embarrassment. Then, she hmphed and for now, swaggered back, then added,

"You will join too, sugar slug dog!"

She pointed at Ryuuji, however, her face was coming undone like it was melting. She can work on the preparations for the Christmas party together with Kitamura, and not just that, but under the natural pretense that she had to live up to the expectations of her classmates. Right now, Taiga's desire was about to be

granted in perfect form. Of course that would make her face melt. Then, the fingers of that face-melting Taiga pointed at Minori.

"Minorin, you too! Let's do it together, together!"

Kyaaaaa~~~~! Ryuuji was kicked into a whirl of even further delight. What a good girl Taiga is. She's an angel of love and a renowned producer. She's the donut-haloed child of Christmas. Ryuuji lifted his ogre face and turned to Minori. Let's do it! Together! Together! However,

"Sorry. This time, Minorin passes, hee-haw."

"Eh!? Why!?"

The voice of Ryuuji's mind synchronized with Taiga's. The hee-haw hee-haw it-be it-be back-stepping Minori closed her eyes obstinately and shook her head right and left.

"I'm not in the mood for Christmas parties. Seriousy..... It ain't really the time for me to be festive..... that match, you know, I really, really, feel responsible for it. If I'm getting bubbly while this is happening to my team, I think I would be setting a bad example to them. There's a match at the turn of the year too, so we have to practice.

That's why, I've gotta say sorry. Enjoy yourself to your heart's content, Taiga."

No way – In other words, she wasn't going to join the Preparatory Committee, and she wasn't going to go to the party. Ryuuji couldn't speak from the shock. It was also partially because he got too excited on his own and thus couldn't deal with the gap in tension. But then, at the moment that the world nearly lost its color all at once , it happened.

".....Ou!"

"Ehehe ♥ In that case, how about I join in place of Minori-chan!?"

Bang! The one that struck a sitting Ryuuji hard on the back and was half-way leaning over him, was Ami, complete with a little whisper of, "What's up with that face?" Taiga then instantly contorted her face.

"Geh, Stupichi!? No, no, don't come here, no hairy guys! Go away, go away, hair balls should do as hair balls do and go back to their forest den!"

"Oh, oh~? Oh my, Tiger-chan, should you really be saying that? Weren't you supposed to be a good girl until Christmas~? Isn't Santa watching~?"

"Ugh....."

Putting her index finger to her lips shiny from gloss and giving her an up-from-under look, Ami magnificently scored one point and silenced Taiga. Then, uttering, "Ufu ♥" and her sweet smile going into full bloom, she leisurely gazed down at the faces of her classmates with her bright, sparkling, large eyes. She assumed control of the mood of the class with her unfair beauty, drawing in the eyes of all those here by force.

"Isn't this going to be fun!? I'm definitely going! Having a Christmas party at school, that's too awesome a plan coming from Yuusaku! I really love these kinds of ideas~! Let's rock the house with 2-C power! Right, everyone!?"

"Yay!" yelled somebody, and applause came about naturally. "I'm definitely, definitely, going!" "I'll join the Committee too" "I can't believe I can spend Eve with Ami-chan!" "This is the peak of my life!" said the men as they shed tears here and there. Even the eyes of the girls

sparkled noisily and cheerfully as they were pointing and laughing at those same men.

She really is good at stuff like this – Ryuuji looked up at Ami, practically astonished. Ami further stirred up the enthusiasm of the class with her smile, put her arms around Taiga, saying, "Let's do it together~♥," and even kissed her on the cheek. "Ogeh!" Taiga said as she was pushing her away, but because she was limited by her " good girl restriction," she couldn't seriously reject her.

"Oh~? What is with those eyes? You don't want to work with me, is that it?"

Probably noticing Ryuuji watching, Ami raised one brow just a little bit while retaining her smile and brightened her large eyes with delight. After looking around just a little at the people who began to get ahead of themselves, she nestled up to him, and, with a quiet, low and nasty tone in her voice,

"Oh riiight. Takasu-kun prefers to be with a certain somebody and not me~"

She blew that whisper into his ear. Ryuuji, naturally, got angry. Likewise, he countered, with a small voice into her ears,

".....Mo-ron, mo-ron, mo-ron!"

He whispered back hotly, persistently, and hatefully. Despite the feebleness of this questionable lexicon, this was the best counterattack he could muster against Ami. Ami shouted in surprise, covered her ears, and attempted to get away. What an unexpected effect – her ears were ticklish apparently. Victory, snickered Ryuuji.

"Heh, serves you right!"

".....Oh, that's so mature!"

Ami glared at him hatefully and sharply, but he didn't give a damn. He'll add a little dance on top to mock her.

"Don't push your luck because Tiger's being strangely quiet! .....You should know though, Takasu-kun. I think it's in your best interests to be nice to me."

"Why?"

"Oh~? You don' know? Projects like this are Ami-chan 's forte. It all depends on Ami-chan whether it takes off or not. .....What do you think some medicine from Ami-chan might do for noisily stirring up and getting a

certain someone that's gloomy from who knows what to come....."

Ryuuji knit his brows. A smile formed on Ami's lips. What was that smile supposed to mean? And what was Ami's intention?

But the only thing he understood was that what Ami was saying was a fact. The event, the party, the project morale.....these were all Ami's super specialties. He didn't think that the most black-hearted girl in the world, Kawashima Ami, would lend a hand in bringing his crush to romantic fruition, but – her sweet whisper went on.

"Takasu-kun, you want to make the party a success right? I also want to make it a hit~. I'm not Tiger, but I really do like Christmas too. I don't have a boyfriend to spend it together with, unfortunately, I don't have work either, and even if I go back home, my parents are busy. I want to have fun, enjoy myself, and party with everyone at school~.....really."

Ami laughed further. Brushing her hair up, her bottomless, moist eyes brightened.

"And, that, is, why. Let's bust our butts on this, together, okay? .....You had wanted to drop out of this, right?"

Ryuuji lifted his face. Then, Ami, with flinching momentum, nodded with an ".....Okay!"

The answer was of course, yes. Yes, yes, yes. He hadn't wanted to bust his butt on this work. But right now, it wasn't the time for him to be dead here. It wasn't the time for him to be trying to figure out what Ami was thinking. For the moment, what he had to do was just act . The battle for Minori and his happy Christmas had begun.

"Ou! Let's do it! Together, Kawashima!"

"Aha ♥ You're finally motivated ♥"

Ryuuji and Ami in perfect rhythm, high-fived each other amidst the cheering. "Ah! Don't get friendly with Ami-chan!" "No good, we have to do something about Takasu quickly." .....He could feel a bucket load of resentful eyes on him, but right now, let's ignore that, let's ignore that. There was only one thing he was thinking about. Please, please, get Minori into the festivities – On

this once a year special day, on this day of battle where those in love are set ablaze, please light Minori's heart on fire.

Minori's eyes were, however, still quiet and cold. She only looked expressionlessly at the face of Ami, the focal point of the cheers of the classmates, and merely stood still. Seeing that, Ami smiled even more gorgeously and beautifully at her, and strangely spoke to her slowly, under her breath.

".....Oh~? What's the matter, Minori-chan? Just like I thought, you wanted to join? In that case, I'll, welcome you, aaanytime?"

"I told you, I can't."

Rapidly retorting just that alone, Minori abruptly turned her eyes away. Ryuuji looked at the side of Ami's face at that moment. Thinking there was something unusual, he continued to watch but didn't ask.

For a while, Ami quietly looked at the turned face of Minori. As if she was waiting for Minori to say something.

On that day, several dozen people from each grade, a more than sufficient enough number of people, were selected as candidates for the Preparatory Committee. Not only the festival-loving people that agreed with the project, but the news of the announcement of Kawashima Ami's participation reaching the other classes was probably the reason for the explosive increase of people.

* * *

"Eh~, Ryuu-chan, are you studying for your finals~? With Taiga-chan~?"

"Yeah. At the usual family restaurant. There's a salmon hamburger steak in the fry pan, so eat it after you heat it up a little. Be careful to not burn the bean paste. The miso soup in the pot has radish and tofu. And, there's leaf mustard in the fridge, so put it on the plate before you eat."

"A~n, what a yummy meal~! But why not eat here if it 's already prepared ~"

"I'm supposed to be having dinner with the other guys ."

"Oh, then, Yacchan's all alone~....."

His real mother let out a sad *funya~* from behind him, but he put his arms into the sleeves of his down jacket as if to shake off the guilt. He lied to Yasuko. The other guys were actually going to arrive after they finished eating at home. It wasn't necessary to go out of his way to have dinner at the family restaurant. But Ryuuji had a reason for wanting to get there in advance no matter what, even if it meant wasting money on eating out, even if it meant lying to his mother, the one making that same money.

He threw his study set into his sailcloth tote bag, and – careful not to forget about it – also threw the Bro Note bundle into it, then checked the contents of his wallet. He already put his mobile phone and key in the back pocket of his Denim pants. He wrapped around himself his

muffler, which had escaped the fate of being stolen by Taiga, and while thinking a little on whether he should put on his knit cap,

"Aw~. Yacchan's giza sad, Gansu."

"....."

He dropped it. He looked back.

Inside the chilly Takasu family 2DK (there's a heater, but it's not on, since the kotatsu is), silence was piling up like snow. What the hell was that – His real mother was lying down on the floor, inside the kotatsu up to her shoulders, and weakly melting. She laughed at her son with an *Ehe~ gaze*.

"Ryuu-chan, you don't know about it? It's the new fad ~ The newcomer at work taught it to me~, the youngsters are talking like this, Kasu! It's like so giza cute, Gasho! It' s the giganto new thing, Gansho! Ehehe~ Then, Yacchan thought that if she can get c'aught up with new trends, she'll be like so gizagiza smart ~ De Yansu, Gansho~nu!"

".....That's enough! Stop! There is something terribly wrong with this!"

Feeling like he wanted to seal his ears, Ryuuji screamed hysterically. The wounds his mind bore were deep. First, fundamentally and decisively, Yasuko was wrong in a lot of ways. Now what do you think of the stupidity of his real mother? The act of reporting happily to her son, “This is in fashion,” reeked of old woman! At one point he had believed that his mother was young, too young, or better yet, childish, but just as he thought, his mother was very much an old woman. Oh, the burden of this truth he was faced with! A famous poem in his Japanese textbook, “When, I picked up my mother screwing around, I realized her old age in her lightness and was hit by shock,” looped in his mind

Unaware of the injuries of her son, Yasuko sharpened her lips on the cushion and in the kotatsu, with not a care in the world

“Eh~? I’m not wrong, Kansu, this is so giza right isn’t it, Gesuyo~. This is terra correct, De Yansu~”

With no make up on and wearing her Uniqlo dressing gown, she snorted haughtily. Alas, that action resulted in showing even further the data file corruption of her face. It was at this time, and only this time, that Ryuuji thanked God for having him inherit only his father’s

genes. Seriously, thank God he didn't inherit Yasuko's slippery structural imitation of a brain. He never met his father, didn't know whether he was dead or alive, and couldn't begin to imagine how smart he was, but at the very least it looked like he was the owner of deeper brows and more concentrated neurotransmitters than Yasuko. He wondered how much chaos the Takasu family would be in now if they were both in the " Slippery giza brain yansu kasu~ " state. Just imagining it was scary.

".....Inko-chan. Take care of Yasuko. You're the only one I can trust."

He gently talked to his pet, Inko-chan, the ugly parakeet standing inside the birdcage with its wings folded in. After doing so, Inko-chan's closed and trashy eyelids twitched. From the edge of its diseased colored half-opened beak, foam fell. Slurping the foam with its tongue up and down its beak slowly and leaving behind sticky threads, it uttered one word.

"Can't."

Then with a whiff, it popped the whites of its eyes, braced its chapped, branch-like legs to the point of

shaking, and turned its back to its master. While it was at it, poop plopped out of it.

"Ou! What disobedience.....!"

"Inko-chan's sad too, Kasu, so he's sulking~, right~ Inko-chan Gyah~"

Inko-chan bit and pulled lightly on the skin of Yasuko's finger, then spit it out with a "Peh!" This was terrible disobedience. By reflex, Ryuuji hardened his face to be as rough as the L'aiguille Creuse and raised his voice.

"What's wrong Inko-chan! Where has my obedient and lovable Inko-chan gone!?"

"Ah I know what's bothering him~! Ryuu-chan, it's that~!"

What Yasuko was pointing at was the cook book he borrowed from the library, "The special treats of Christmas." On its cover, was TA-DAH, an outstanding, barbequed chicken! In large red letters, "Let's throw ourselves around a whole bird!" He hastily jumped over to the book and threw it under the cushion. Then,

".....I'm sorry, Inko-chan. That was insensitive of me. I promise you, I won't make something like *TA-DAH, it's chicken!* in here, ever.

He sat on his heels facing the bird cage and bowed his head. Yasuko, following suit, lowered her head with a " Sowwy ." Inko-chan's dirty eyes flickered towards its mother and son masters.

".....Really!?"

"Really."

".....You promise!?"

"I promise."

The popped pupils of the beak-shaking Inko-chan reflected the sharp, near-critical-mass light coming from its owner's eyes. Hair follicles were opening on the bald, bird skin exposed portion at the top of its head. But, just at the moment when the rift in the relationship between pet and master was about to be mended,

".....How regrettable.....! This is, a very, regrettable sight.....!"

Taiga had entered the living room before they had realized it and expressed her regret on witnessing the kneeling of mother and son towards the bird cage. She probably came up since Ryuuji wasn't coming down, even though they were supposed to be meeting in front of the apartment. He was sure that Taiga had a lot more to say, but since she was still in the middle of her "good girl" term, this was as far as she would go.

"Ah~Taiga-chan! So you're going out to study~?" Break a gira leg, De Yansu~"

"Ya, Yacchan!? W.....wh...wh, why are you,"

Yasuko tightened her lips, and began slowly wriggling her arms. Her son began to think. Was this supposed to be a Sankai Juku dance troupe act? No, this had to be an octopus imitation. She was happily mumbling, "Squiid," but this was definitely an octopus dance.

"Regretttaaaabbllle....."

Holding her forehead with her hand, Taiga closed her eyes as if she were fighting off dizziness.

The sun completely fell and the midwinter night air became chillingly cold. The sole saving grace of this night was the fact that no wind was blowing. All the people on the street had their coat collars up and walked quickly with scowls. A conversation other than "It's cold!" and " Uooooooo!" couldn't even be passed between Ryuuji and Taiga as well, and as if competing against each other,

they trotted down the asphalt street for almost 10 minutes.

"Uwa~! It was so cold~!"

"Haa~! It's warm~! .....Wait, it's damn hot. The heater 's way too powerful."

As if they were leaping in, they had pushed open the bright glass door.

They were in the familiar highway-side family restaurant. Ryuuji took one step inside and felt like he was suffocating from the hot air of the heater. Groaning " uwaaa" and "fueee," Ryuuji tore off his knit cap, while Taiga removed her colorful and fluffy mohair cap. Her long, lightly-colored hair fell softly, and the two of them finally caught a warm breath.

They told the waitress that came to greet them that friends would be joining them later and for the moment got a window seat for four. Ryuuji looked around the restaurant and then asked the waitress,

"Um, excuse me. Is Kushieda-san working in today's shift? Um.....we're, her friends at school."

"Kushieda is off today. When you have decided what your order will be, please press the button."

Ryuuji stiffened from this plain answer. She's off? That 's impossible. Taiga also knit her brows and said,

"I can't believe it, that's weird, I was sure she'd be here .....she's always working here on Monday nights. Is she off only for today?"

"I knew it, we should have checked for sure before this .....Ah, damn, what a screw-up."

Taiga invited Minori to come to today's study session, but Minori refused, saying, "I have work after my club's over." She even added that she'll ask for the note books when she needs them, so Ryuuji could use them however he pleased in the meantime. Because of these circumstances, Ryuuji childishly went to the trouble of coming to this family restaurant, the place where she should have been working today. However, he struck out perfectly.

"There's something weird going on. Let's ask her where she's working now."

Taiga, twisting her head, quickly took out her mobile phone, but Ryuuji extended his arm out from the other side and stopped her.

".....Don't worry about it. Just forget it. We'd be bothering her if we called her while she was working, and she can't reply back even if we send her an email, right. We can't do anything about it today. It's our own fault for not making sure she was here. And, this might be heaven telling us to study. .....Let's eat already, give up on this, and study. Here's the menu."

"......Hm....."

Taiga took off her coat, opened the menu, but a part of her seemed to be half-distracted and thinking about something else. When he flicked the corner of the menu with his finger, Taiga finally began to look at the letters.

"I'll have a winter vegetable beef curry. What about you?"

"I'll take a pumpkin doria. And the drink bar option."

They called the waitress with the button, finished ordering, went together to the drink bar, and picked up

their drinks. There was some time before what they ordered would come, so he thought about taking a look at a textbook. But when he was just about to open it,

".....Hey, Ryuuji. I was thinking about it, but."

Taiga mumbled awkwardly. What, he wondered as he raised his eyes and put his mouth to the coffee.

"You're not being avoided by Minorin are you?"

Clang. The coffee cup noisily missed the plate. Not only that, some of the hot liquid inside landed on his hand, and his elbow, which reeled back in surprise, hit the wall hard. So painful and numbing that he couldn't speak, Ryuuji hung his head down on reflex.

"Aaah.....I knew it, I shouldn't have said anything....."

".....No! You're going to tell me! Wh, why!?"

Taiga's eyes were pointed up like she was astonished, and she then spoke softly while twirling her long hair with her fingertips.

"Today, I was looking at you and Minorin as a set for the first time in a while, and I was thinking. .....Before I was suspended, the two of you were talking normally, but today, the amount of conversation between you was zero."

".....It's not as bad as zero. I talked to her. Properly. Several times."

"That might as well be zero. Actually, there weren't even any chances for you to have a real conversation with her. Minorin definitely wouldn't come close if I tried to get her to come near you. Ryuuji. She spent the whole time messing around and didn't really talk with us. She wouldn't come even after I invited her here. She's supposed to be working, but she's not here. .....Maybe, she's lying about working today."

"She's lying? That's a little hard to swallow."

Minori would definitely not lie. She wasn't the person that would lie. .....Or at least, that was what Ryuuji believed, but apparently Taiga didn't.

"I don't know. Minorin isn't some 'stupid and cute girl ', no. Even a fanatic like you should at least know that

the simple, bright, and funny girl personality isn't all there is to her, right? .....That personality's also one of Minorin's good points, but....."

"......Well, that's....."

Yeah. Now that she said it this way, Ryuuji also had to agree. Being called a fanatic didn't sit well with him, but he'd seen that other side to Minori many times, like for example, back at summer vacation, when he was tricked by her.

"....That's true, but."

"And, on top of that, she said she won't go to the Eve party or participate in the Committee. She said she doesn 't plan on coming. That's not possible for the normal Minorin."

"....No, but Kushieda said that she's not going because she's upset about the match. I really can't believe she's lying. .....Yeah, if you think Kushieda's acting strange, it has to be because of the match."

Thus, he's not being avoided by her. Ryuuji then spoke slightly louder as if to put a lid on whatever Taiga was about to say next.

"The problem is how to excite her enough to come. This is where her Lordship Angel Taiga gets to show off her skill, am I right? Didn't you say you'd even go bare naked to help me out?"

"Haa? Bare naked? I didn't say that. You're kidding, in this situation?"

Ryuuji inadvertently faltered because eyes, cold enough without verbal abuse, were looking at him. She let out an artificially large sigh. Taiga probably was in the mood to click her tongue, but she held it back and sipped her cocoa.

".....Well, yes, I remember, of course. Angel Taiga is the messenger of love. The heaven-sent child of Christmas. The good girl mirror. Santa's watching and checking too. .....Which is why, I'll bring Minorin to the Eve party no matter what it takes. I fully intend to back you up as your Cupid and make your confession a success."

And to show just how serious she was, closing one eye , she made the motion of mounting an arrow to a bow, took careful aim, and then fired it into Ryuuji's heart. ..... He got the feeling that there wasn't much of a point in

aiming at his heart over here, but that wasn't the problem.

"I don't even know if I can co....n, fess to her....."

"You should. It's Eve after all. It's the night before holy Christmas after all."

She asserted frankly, this time with clouds forming over her brows at her second sigh.

".....But, there's definitely something strange going on . I just know it. I don't know how to support you two anymore. This is different from before. Before, you two were more,"

"I've brought your order!" said the waitress, cutting off what Taiga was going to say. Food was placed before them, the bill was slipped into the bill holder, and for a while, there was silence. After the waitress left, Ryuuji handed a spoon over to Taiga.

"And? .....What comes after 'you two were more'?"

".....Oh, never mind. There's no use in me thinking about it either. There's no way you would understand either. Let's eat before it cools down, for now.....Ow ow ow ow! Aaaa!"

Taiga quickly burned herself from the first bite, but in addition to that, dripped white sauce on the opened math textbook.

"Aaaaaaa! Dammit, I knew you would do that! You klutz! Wipe it, wipe it, wipe it!"

"I wiped it, okay. This is good enough. .....Ah~, there's oil stains on it.....Oh well. At least this way, we have an easier test scope, from where the stains are."

What the hell is she saying, thought a dismayed Ryuuji as he picked up the textbook. He was going to try a little more at removing the stain that Taiga gave up on. But, at that time,

"Yo! Takasu & Tiger, we kept you waiting! We're all here."

"We're here! Ah, aw nice, you're eating! That looks great~ maybe I should order something too~"

Raising his face to the sound of Noto and Haruta's voices, Ryuuji yelled an "Ou" and waved his hand. And behind those two, were two more people, slightly surprising Ryuuji. Taiga was also shaken, it seemed, and froze with the spoon still in her mouth.

"Yo! It's really cold today isn't it! Even I'm starting to want to get a down coat."

"See, Maruo, didn't I say that a down coat's the best way to stay warm? There's cheap ones too. Ah, see, see, Takasu-kun also has a down coat."

Sticking to the side of Kitamura, who was wearing a grey-duffle-coated like he was preparing for his college entrance examinations, was a short-down-coated and large-puffy-bag-holding Maya, wearing out of sheer willpower a miniskirt for her exposed legs and long boots. Her silky, straight, lone hair, which was redyed into a slightly dark tone, went well with her light makeup of only mascara and gloss, and it was obvious that the brigade of school-uniformed boys sitting nearby were looking at Maya. These eyes were different from the , "She's a performer.....Uwaa!" that Ami gets and different from the, "What a beautiful girl.....Wow~!" of Taiga. This rawer, closer type of flurry, in which it was

very possible she might be hit on, reached Ryuuji's ears. He didn't feel superior that he was meeting with that same Maya. Well, actually, a little bit, but.

"Kihara. .....What's up? I didn't think you'd come."

"I also wanted a copy of the Bro Notes. I didn't feel like studying by myself. Is it okay if I'm here?"

"N, not a problem at all....Kawashima and Kashii are?"

"Ah, they can't come it looks like. Oh right, can I have copies for Ami-chan and Nanako too?"

"I don't mind at all, but....."

He could understand why Ami would come, but Maya ? He didn't think she'd come by herself, independent of the usual trio. "Hey, let's sit down already," said Maya as she pulled on the sleeve of Kitamura's coat. Wrinkles formed on the brow of Taiga, spoon still in mouth. Maybe she didn't know how she was supposed to deal with Maya as opposed to Ami, or maybe her good girl restriction was getting in the way. Taiga silently alternated glances between Kitamura and Maya, who was clinging to Kitamura. Then,

"Okay then, okay then, let's sit down, let's all sit down ! It's a bit too crowded here for six people."

Announcing his territorial occupation of it, Noto put his bag on the two-seat table across of them in a strangely abrupt way.

"Okay, okay, Tiger, stand up! Haruta, you go all the way in over there. Kihara will be sitting next to Takasu, go on, go on. Then, I'll be next to Haruta. Tiger, come over here, bring the doria, yeah, this seat. Okay, Kitamura, you go over here. Take my bag, thanks. Right, we're done."

Before he knew it, Taiga and Kitamura were excellently positioned and facing each other at the two-seat table and slightly removed from the other four.

"Eh, eh, wait, wait, hold on!? I want to sit there too! No , I mean, um, ah, I know, us girls will sit together! Right, right, right, Tiger, how about it!"

Maya, strangely nervous and panicky, was about to get up, but not even giving her a moment to wait for Taiga's response, Haruta said, "Silence~," heartily picking his nose.

"Uwah, gross!"

"Don't be such a baby~. Is sitting next to Takacchan that horrible~? I feel totally sorry for Takacchan~, you're so cold~ Kihara. She's cruel~, right, Takkachan?"

This time, he pointed his dirty finger at Ryuuji. Kihara shook her head with a frantic look.

"Eh!? No, no, it's not that! It's not that, but,"

"Anyway, let's order something! Drink bar for four, that's okay, right?!"

Noto shut out the rest of Maya's sentence with abnormal skill. He swiftly pushed the button, called the waitress, and completed his order. Maya, losing her timing, shut up, but glared at Noto like she still had something to say. Ignoring her, Noto removed his glasses , muttering "Ah, a finger mark," and proceeded to wipe the lens busily with a napkin.

What is this unpleasant feeling in the air – Just when Ryuuji was about to take a slight gulp of air,

"Well then, now it's free drink time! We'd be disturbing the other customers if we all went, so I'll pick

up something for you guys. Any requests? If not, you're all getting cola!"

The one that stood up, moving along at his own pace regardless of the unpleasantness, was Kitamura. Noto, Haruta, and Ryuuji spontaneously applauded the manliness of "You're all getting cola." However, immediately after,

"Ah, ah, ah, I'll have something w, warm ....no! I'll go too."

Taiga, face completely red, got up from her seat to chase after Kitamura. Noto and Haruta gave each other a high five. Ryuuji was speechless. Maya was silent. Over at the drink bar, glasses were passed between Kitamura and Taiga, ice was put inside, a waitress was called when they couldn't find cups, ice was dropped (Taiga), ice was picked up (Kitamura), tongs were dropped (Taiga), tongs were picked up (Kitamura). They made a pretty good combo from an outside point of view.

Noto and Haruta were looking at this with smug looks –

".....And. What are you trying to pull."

"Eh? What. What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me."

Ryuuji's evil eye penetrated Noto's glasses and were homing in on Noto's simple, otter eyes. He might be dense, but even he'd realize there was something up when it was being done this blatantly.

"Why are you trying so hard to hook Taiga up with Kitamura?"

Yeah. Since this morning, Noto has been acting strange . He's been doing nothing but pushing Taiga towards Kitamura. He's continued doing it in a way that can't be described as casual; it was blatant. A little otter couldn't dare hope to survive the dark elemental, burning, black, flame of Ryuuji's eyes. Noto gave up without a fight and stuck out his tongue. This was, by the way, not adorable at all.

".....So you figured it out. Well, that's fine anyway. I wanted your help for this too. You know, I'm thinking that Kitamura and Tiger are looking good together."

"Ah, me too, me too~!"

Sickeningly putting their hands over each other, Noto and Haruta nodded at each other. Ryuuji's movements were brought to a stop.

"Kitamura's all heartbroken from getting left by Bro. He's doing fine as the Student President, but he has to be hurting on the inside. I want to him to cheer up fast. And to do that, don't you think a new love is the perfect remedy? And, don't tell anyone else this but....."

Noto briefly turned his head to the drink bar, making sure that Taiga and Kitamura didn't come back yet, and then lowered his voice.

"......It looks like Tiger, likes Kitamura. This is serious like, serious. .....You probably didn't notice at all, you being the way you are."

Without thinking at all.

Without thinking at all, he stared back at Noto. With his mouth half-opened and a stupid look on his face. Noto went off on his own, to a "Yes, yes, I know, I know" kind of expression of understanding and continued.

"Aaaah, I knew that'd surprise you. It was a major surprise to me too. Who would have thought 'that' Tiger

had that kind of girly side to her? And since you've been the one that's been looking after Tiger the closest, it's only natural for you to be shocked."

He couldn't talk. He couldn't say anything. Not even one word.

How did you find out, or, I knew that for a while; none of these were the words that were stuck in his throat. It wasn't that, and surprising to himself, they were,

- What do you people know.

Or,

- Don't butt in when you don't know anything.

Or.

- Mind your own business.

And so on.

These words were quietly boiling inside of him from an almost pale anger-like sensation and were stealing the

expression off from Ryuuji's face. He was covered in an invasive possessiveness, inflated sense of superiority, that sort of off-the-mark hue.

But in addition to that, he thought, "It's not that." " You're wrong, you're wrong." .....It was when he reached that point that he finally realized the strangeness of his own thoughts. Just what was, "It's not that"? Just what was "wrong"? Taiga loves Kitamura. Wasn't that fact? Wasn't that the straight to the point proposition that had been lying in front of Ryuuji and Taiga? Wasn't what Noto was saying....correct?

Then, why was he trying to deny, even reject "it", even when it had been clearly worded as objective truth?

He didn't know. He didn't understand anything anymore –

"Okay, sorry for the wait! Here's four colas!"

A tray was placed in front and Ryuuji lifted his face as if it had been bounced back. With his usual all-Uniqlo casual wear showing completely, Kitamura swiftly passed the drink trays to the four of them.

"First, why don't we all start off from math? Then, if there's anything we don't understand, let's all spend some time thinking while we look at the President's notes."

"Okay, sure, but there shouldn't be anything that the Great Sensei doesn't understand, no~? Me, there's nothing I know....."

Kitamura, while laughing, shook his head to what Haruta said.

"That's common. Okay, talk to you later."

He turned around and was returning to Taiga's table. Even when looking at her from the side, he could tell that Taiga was nervous all over. When she was about to clear away her doria, she dropped her spoon, when she was about to pick it up, she dropped her pencil case, when she was about pick that up, she dropped her textbook, and finally, dropped her note book. Each time that happened, the color of her face went up one grade higher in thick pink. Kitamura, asking her if she was all right, then moved to help her. As he helped pick up the items, she replied that she was fine with a clumsy smile. Kitamura, looking back at her, smiled gently. With no

opportunity for Ryuuji to do anything, the four arms efficiently picked up what had been dropped.

"......I told you. They sure do look like a good couple. With that done, I'll be off to the restroom for a bit before studying."

"Ah, I want to go too~."

Noto and Haruta stood up, but even still, Ryuuji was still there and didn't move. He felt extremely strange. By being given the perspective from a "third person" like Noto, right now, and suddenly, it almost began to seem like Taiga and Kitamura, sitting slightly off from him, were people he had never met before. But, ah ha. Ah ha – If he thought of those two as being people he didn't know, it did seem like Taiga and Kitamura made a good match, more, far more than he had ever thought. They did, really.

"Ta, Takasu-kun! Hey, hey, hey, hey! Hey!"

".....Ah, ou....."

Maya, who had been sitting next to him, rubbed him with her elbow and snapped him out of his trance. Maya lowered her voice to a tone that only Ryuuji could hear and whispered with an impatient scowl on her face.

"What do you think, Takasu-kun!? Are you thinking the same thing they're thinking!? .....Do you think that they look good together, do you think that they should date each other!?"

"Eh.....er....that's...actually, ...a bit...too sudden...."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Maya, nodding, like she sniped the sentence fragment he inadvertently stumbled at.

"I knew it, you don't think so right! .....Everyone's saying that, but they're all wrong, right!"

"Wait, hold on, what, do you mean by everyone....."

"You'd be upset if Tiger and Maruo hooked up right! Everybody in class is saying that the reason you're with Tiger is because you're just really, really nice and can't help taking care of people. Nothing more and nothing less, that's what they say. But, the truth is, you like Tiger, right!?"

"What!? Wa, wa, wait, ...What!?"

"I'll support you, Takasu-kun! I really will! .....So don't give up!"

After showing off a vigorous fist pump, Maya quietly looked at Taiga and Kitamura's table. At this point, anything he might say to deny this wouldn't change her mind. He'd known for a while that Kitamura was popular among the girls, so he wasn't surprised about the hot eyes that Maya directed towards Kitamura, but it wasn't that. Just wait a minute.

Exactly what had happened while he wasn't looking? Who knew what and how much of what, and what did they want to accomplish? What should he do? He's only been getting more confused and couldn't resolve what he was feeling anymore. This is giganto confusing Guns and Roses. My terra Andalucia is Iscandar. Does not compute . That's about all he understood.

Taiga and Kitamura had the doria plate taken away, opened the math textbook, but without dropping their eyes, they seemed to say something to each other. The words that he could hear in fragments were, *Christmas Eve*, *party*, *Preparatory Committee*, *Stupid Council*, ...

Noto and Haruta returned and textbooks began to be opened at his table as well. “On the way back, we could all go on a copying spree at a convenience store on the way back, right.” “Better yet, why don’t we start leaving in turns now and go copying~?” “That’d annoy the people running this place wouldn’t it?” He nodded and shook his head to make it look like he was participating in the conversation, but Ryuuji was unsettled. Restlessly drifting, wandering, and not even knowing where to look, he looked right and he looked left while being washed away. Then he looked in front of himself and remembered. Crap, the curry’s gotten cold. He’d been so distracted that he’d forgotten to eat. .....That’s right, first , he should finish this.

But then, it happened. Right at the moment that he clenched his spoon and shoved a load of curry and rice into his mouth,

“Stool test! Ryuuji, there’s a stool test! The committee members, they all have to take stool tests!”

“Ppht---!” He almost spit out all of the curry. He frantically puckered his lips and gulped down the brownness.

"Yo, you.....you were waiting for me to put that in my mouth weren't you!?"

"Haa? Waiting for what?"

Taiga tilted her head with a curious look on her face, and from behind her, Kitamura shook his head gravely.

"She's right. Everyone has to take a stool test since they'll also be dealing with food."

"Quit it~! Hey, you people~! Where's your delicacy~! Don't talk about curry when people are eating scat~! Whoops, my bad! I mean, don't be talking about scat when people are eating curry! Right, the sca.... curry-eating Takacchan over here!"

After he was dealt an additional blow to the stomach by kind Haruta, the curry began to look like something else to Ryuuji's delicate eyes. Mera, oh my gAnderson.

Chapter 3

However, the time that flew like an arrow and marched forward with each day, wouldn't grant Ryuuji the reprieve to be able to stay in merry disarray.

"Habu!"

"Kyaa!"

Glittering shreds of paper fluttered and scattered about, surrounded by two-person's worth of muffled screaming. The screaming of others was then added on top as an empty cardboard box tumbled to the corner of the hall.

"Oh no! What should we do, oh this is bad! It all came out!"

"Dammit, you klutz! If you're going to be screaming, pick the pieces up, pick them up! Let me see that, is your knee okay? Aaaah, you scraped it didn't you! Damn, you really are a klutz!"

"I don't need you to tell me that! Ow.....I messed up again didn't I....."

What Taiga scattered throughout the hallway after school was gold and silver confetti, which had taken the efforts of five people to make by shredding streamers. This could have been bought, but since it was surprisingly expensive, the Preparatory Committee, wanting to curtail costs, decided to make it themselves. Several hours of silent and plain labor were spent before homeroom, at lunch, and then after school. Once a large enough amount for several boxes was completed, a klutz emptied all the contents of one box while falling forward and rolling about two times.

The klutzy culprit got up, scowled with irritation, and looked at her hurting red knee.

"Excuse me! Could someone please help pick my stuff up over here too!"

"Ah, I'm sorry....."

Ryuuji turned his head toward the voice of the bachelorette homeroom teacher (30) that had been rear-ended by Taiga. From what he could see, the large

amounts of handouts that the bachelorette (in good health) had been carrying were also scattered in the hallway. He was glad that she wasn't fall over, but.....if he said.....my, what an impressive 30-year old lower body, ...a bachelorette door that shouldn't be opened will open into a bachelorette dimension. So, without saying anything unnecessary, he quickly got down to his knees, leaving the confetti to the other guys, and began picking up the handouts.

"Why me~! I had these handouts arranged in order but now they're a mess~!"

"I'm really sorry. She's the culprit. That little idiot over there!"

Introduced by Ryuuji, Taiga lightly picked up the edges of her skirt, bent her knees, and saying, "Sorry," bowing with surprising docility. This too was probably a part of the good girl Taiga policy. Had this been the normal version, the bachelorette (both parents in good health) would have been subjected to stepping solo steps for all of a bachelorette eternity in a hell of 64 beat tsks. The bachelorette (no siblings), not knowing how fortunate she was, muttered "Good grief, you kids are so restless....." while furrowing her brows.

"You two sure have been working for the Preparatory Committee an awful lot for the past few days, but is everything fine? I don't mind that you're excited about the Christmas party, but don't forget about your tests. And Aisaka-san, have you caught up with the classes you missed during your suspension?"

Aaaah, ugh, half-heartedly replied Taiga while she focused on picking up the confetti, so Ryuuji answered in her place.

"We've been having study sessions with our group. If there's anything we're stumped on, we ask questions to each other, move on, and teach and learn from each other , that kind of thing. But it doesn't look like there's much stuff that Taiga doesn't know already, and, we do have Kanou-senpai's killer notes in the end, so we're kind of able to manage."

"Is that so?.....Well, Aisaka-san's grades, at least, are good. You also have extremely good grades, but Haruta-kun, and Haruta-kun, and Haruta-kun, you see.... "

".....Haruta you say."

"And Haruta-kun. .....Sigh. Haruta-kun isn't in the Preparatory Committee, is he?"

"Don't worry. By order of Kitamura, we've kept the party off-limits to him, and we're forcing him to concentrate on studying."

Clad in a grey knit top and a white tight skirt, the small diamond pendant on her chest shaking, and making an iron wall crouch (The ultimate anti-panty shot technique, in which her knees are on the floor, her thigh is tilted diagonally, leaving no opportunity to see her underwear. While a refined technique, when learned, your untouchable, unpopular-with-the-opposite-sex aura rises!), the bachelorette (civil servant) picked up her handouts, but still looked at Ryuuji's face with worry.

"Please, be sure, be sure, be very sure, to not neglect your studies and drop your grades like him. .....You and Aisaka-san have been busy with the Preparatory Committee recently and I've been a little worried."

"I'm sorry....."

Apologizing lightly, Ryuuji scratched his head.

Yes, what the bachelorette (college graduate) said wasn't completely off the mark. Lately, Ryuuji and Taiga's days have been consumed by work from the Committee and have been tempestuously busy.

They met early in the morning with the Student Council and had done this and that for the party preparations. There was plenty that had to be done. The Committee had to assign personnel, draft plans for obtaining the necessary materials, work out the budget, pester teachers about receiving expenditures from the Student Council budget, meet during lunch, finalize the daily schedule and work, determine if they were going to split up into groups, check their progress, and after school, decorate the place with confetti and what not, but mainly, they all performed manual labor.

Concurrent to that, classes were still going on as usual and the term finals were getting closer. At night, they'd have study sessions at the family restaurant or someone's house, and after they split up, each would study separately at their own house. The teachers, however, had been saying it again and again, that they only reluctantly allowed the party on Christmas Eve, and if

anyone neglected their classes and as a result received bad test results because of the party preparations, the party will be immediately canceled.

Taiga's joining of the Preparatory Committee, especially, hadn't been looked on well by the adults. Of course, they wouldn't welcome the involvement of Taiga in the non-officially sanctioned so-called "fun club" of the students, seeing as she was the biggest problem child in school, the troublemaker everyone knew, and, who on top of that, finally obtained a record the other day. Harsh comments like, she hasn't learned her lesson, or her punishment was too light, were not few in number.

However, among them, there was only one person, the bachelorette, no, their homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri, that had been in favor of Taiga's participation in the Committee, on the grounds that Taiga's grades were far from bad, that this will be the necessary stress relief for emotionally stabilizing Taiga, that her involvement in an event in a position of responsibility will deepen her own sense of being a student of this school

The so-called bachelorette (she's a single child, but she doesn't care about keeping her family name) was holding up Taiga's back, and if Taiga fell down, the bachelorette's

(in other words, she doesn't want someone to marry into her family!) position will also become shaky. And at this moment, an event that embodied that very statement itself occurred.

".....But, anyway. I don't think you need to worry about Taiga at all. Taiga's grades are much better than mine. While we were studying together for these term finals, we showed each other the results we got for the midterms, and that's when I first found out. I hate to say it, but I didn't expect that from the way she normally is.... "

"Back in her first year, she had to take make-up examinations a few times because she had gotten 0s for forgetting to write her name. But don't you worry, this year I've been telling her, 'Write your name! Your name! Your n-a-m-e!' before the tests."

"I apologize on behalf of the klutz..... Here you go, that's everything."

"Thank you!"

"I'm sorry for the trouble. Bache.....Sensei, are you coming to the Christmas Eve party?"

"I most certainly will not! I don't have plans, but by my honor, I refuse to go! .....But, "

An faint laugh shook her soft, unexpected smile.

"I hope it's a success. You guys have been working so hard on setting it up, so your efforts have to be rewarded ."

The tip of Ryuuji's nose reddened involuntarily by what the bachelorette (she's ready to become a bride anytime!) had to say. He was finally able to emit flame from the tip of his nose! .....No, that wasn't it. To be rewarded – in other words, Minori will come. To spend Christmas Eve with his crush. Ryuuji, and Lord Angel Taiga as well, used up precious time on preparing for the party for that purpose.

He wanted to be rewarded. Ryuuji fell silent for a bit and reflected on what she had said. He wanted to spend his once in a lifetime, seventeenth Christmas Eve with..... he wanted to spend this lovers' day, with Minori. Taiga should've felt the same way too. She should be wishing that she could make the party a success with Kitamura.

The bachelorette (ah, she's also proficient in language ♥) wouldn't have a clue to this, but he felt that the way

she was gently looking at Taiga was full of earnest warmth. It was clear to Ryuuji by just her eyes that she was truly concerned about Taiga, the problem child, as her homeroom teacher. This adult was definitely on their side, he thought.

Taiga was crawling in the hallway, and – " Aisaka-senpai! There's garbage inside~!" "Geh! Awawa, oh no, oh no!" "I'll remove the garbage, so senpai, please keep gathering the pieces! If someone passes, they'll get scattered!" "No! Oh no!" – while making a big ruckus with the first year students, she picked up the pieces of her own klutzy mess. When they first laid their eyes on her, the underclassmen had been terror-stricken at the appearance of the most vicious animal, the Palmtop Tiger . But now, because Taiga was in her Christmas-only good girl mode, even they were completely treating her rather normally as an upperclassmen and seemed to have gotten used to following up on her goofs.

Senpai, over there! Over there too! While he was looking at Taiga hurriedly going back and forth left and right in response to her underclassmen, Ryuuji's face sinisterly convulsed involuntarily. It was a smile.

"......Taiga, she loves Christmas. To be honest, it's a little hard for me to understand..... That's why she's working so hard. She said that she has to be a good girl because Santa's looking, something stupid like that."

"My, so that's why. .....I understand how she feels, all girls love Christmas."

"Really?"

"I'm not at an age where I can be called a girl anymore, but I love it. Christmas.....Tiffany, and Cartier, Gucci and Coach.....Hermes, Bulgari, Dior, Chanel....Chloe, Bottega, Mark, Jaco, bu, su, u, u, u, uooooooooooooooooooooo!"

".....Ou!?"

THE BACHELORETTE BLEW THE FIRE OF WORLDLY DESIRE!

RYUUJI SHUDDERED!

COMMAND (DOWN) ESCAPE

CAN'T ESCAPE!

"I'm, going to buy myself a rewaaaaaard! It's Christmas, it's all right isn't it!? A watch, a bag, or an accessory, my budget's at a big 30,000 yen! It's my first Christmas since turning 30 after all, and this is a reward for 30 years worth of hard work! Thus, it's fine if I buy something!"

"....."

"Wh, why are you looking at me like that!? If you have something to say, why don't you say it!?"

"....."

"You, you think that it's going to be a waste of money don't you!? I bet you're thinking, you're being fooled by the "Reward yourself " marketing, you bachelorette, you bachelorette, you bachelorette, right?!"

"....."

"No....Stop it....don't look at me with those eyes....don't looooooook! I know, even I know, I know it's a waste of money! But, but, but! I don't know how to get the energy to live without raising my tension this way! I don't know what's the point of working toooooo! Ugyaaaa!"

"....."

"Sob, sob, I'm squandering money aren't I.....I might be single for the rest of my life, I might need almost 70,000,000 yen when I'm old, but I can't expect to die easily if I spend 30,000 yen on showy brand goods just

because it's Christmas, right.....But, but, let's say I save and save, hold back on buying everything I want, and then I finally get 100,000,000 yen, yahoo! But the next minute, Japan's going up in hyper inflation and it's become a world where savings are just pieces of paper, what would you do? And besides t.....huh? I think I might have seen.....maybe.....I should buy an apartment!?"

"....."

"I, I see.....if I take a loan and buy one....that'll settle the inflation problems perfectly, right!?"

"....."

"Right, right, that's right! I shouldn't be wasting time buying brand goods! I'll save money for the down payment and buy an apartment! A fashionable, new apartment, for one person, by the station! And when I get married, I'll lease it out, right!? Kyaa ♪"

"....."

".....Then again, maybe I'll end up spending the rest of my life there and be found as a lonely corpse....."

"......."

Looking at the illusions of cold powdery snow falling painfully behind the bachelorette (Mercury, still retrograding.....sob), Ryuuji was at a loss as to what to say to her. Absolute zero snow blew from permafrost called emptiness that festered inside the hearts of the ice ace generation.

"This is the last one! Ryuuji, I picked up everything! Let's go to the gym, they're waiting over there!"

"Ah, yeah! Ou!"

Picking up her box once more, Taiga roared. She stamped her feet, telling him to hurry. Ryuuji finally receiving the chance to escape, bowed, and ran down the hallway, following Taiga while carrying his own box. *Ah! Don't run!* echoed the voice of the Bachelorette, who still chose to continue living her difficult life, but they raced down the stairs as if to flee from a curse.

With each carrying one confetti box, the destination they were heading to was the gym storeroom. Over there , the Student Council Team led by Kitamura should be organizing the items that had been fabricated. The confetti was originally not included in the schedule, so

the one full day of work spent on the confetti had to be made up by the Taiga Group starting now. Hurry, hurry, he mumbled to himself as he kicked his own butt, but then,

"Yo! It's Taiga!"

He noticed the ringing voice. This time, Ryuuji was the one who nearly unleashed the confetti.

"Oh, Minorin! What a coincidence! Club activity?"

Taiga stopped her feet and answered with a smile. She secretly winked at Ryuuji, like she wanted to say, *Yes!*

"Yeah, we've been doing muscle training in the gym. Kitamura-kun and the gang were there, hustling."

Minori also laughed and stopped moving. The person they had nearly passed was Minori, in a jersey, slightly sweating, cheeks glowing, and with her hair tied up in a crumpled and bland bun. However, she was with several other second year students. "Kushieda, the coach's going to yell if we don't hurry up!" one girl said, tugging on her jersey. "Aisaka-senpai, we should hurry up!" said a first year girl frantically to a stopped Taiga from behind.

Oh my, oh my, anyway! See you later! she said with regret, however, the two girls began walking again practically simultaneously, then,

"....Hey. There have been a lot of near-misses lately."

"......Ou."

There was a brief, strobe like light –

It was an unavoidable, direct, glance that hit him from the front.

Kushieda Minori's two eyes definitely had looked toward him, he thought. He tried to reply lightly and quickly, but unable to make a good face, he contorted his mouth. Seeing that, indeed seeing that, Minori uttered a strange and comical "Fuh, he" then turned around. Ryuuji then frantically released a strained voice from his tension-stiff throat and hurled it in the direction of her back.

"C.....Christmas Eve! Party! You'll have fun! So, Kushieda, you come too!"

She heard it, didn't she?

She should have heard it.

Minori turned her head a little and was about to say something with a problematic look on her face, but before she could, the girl next to her immediately took her by the arm. "Hurry up!" the girl had said, and Minori was tugged away. Judging from her expression, what Minori was about to say but couldn't, wasn't the response that Ryuuji was waiting for. But, she should have heard him. What Ryuuji tried hard to say must have reached Minori.

Another near-miss – Lately, this has been happening a lot. Lately, no, more like, for the past few days. In the morning, at lunch, after school. Minori didn't join the study group, nor was she working at the family restaurant. The only thing building up between the two of them were days of near-misses

But, even so.

Even so, Ryuuji still believed.

That as long as Minori showed up at the party, everything would work out.

Minori said that she was in a slump now. She said that being bubbly wouldn't be setting a good example to her club members. He wanted her to at least get in the mood to think about going. But, the only things that he could do were clumsily invite her in that one moment that they ran into each other, and get the preparations in order in the event that Minori came. .....Of course, he really wanted to do more. If there was anything he could do, he'd do it. He wanted to, but he didn't know how, and could only look at Minori's back. He was only able to become aware of just how useless he was day by day.

But if there was anything he had, it was a wish. He believed in it from the bottom of his heart.

As long as she came to the Christmas Eve party, as long as the party became a success and everyone had fun and everyone laughed, Minori should be back to her old, cheerful self and points that smile of hers on him. Then, Ryuuji should become happy after looking at that smile. Yes – in the end, he wanted Minori to cheer up. To Ryuuji, keeping Minori smiling, and having her smile at him, were important and special above all.

He wanted Minori to be happy.

So that's it, he thought, as he finally realized what he'd been unaware of. Somewhere along the way, he mixed up the order of the means and the ends.

It shouldn't have been, "Since I'm having a party on Christmas Eve, I want to bring a brooding Minori." It should be, "Because I want Minori to cheer up, I want her to have a good time at the Eve party." That's how Ryuuji truly felt.

Your efforts have to be rewarded. The words whispered by the adult on his side resonated to the bottom of his chest like a protective charm. That was really it. He really wanted to be rewarded. To do that, he can keep working no matter how little sleep he gets. He can keep working no matter how worried he is. He can overcome it no matter how many near misses there are.

As long as Ryuuji believed that Minori's face would be waiting for him across the horizon, he will be able to overcome anything. Yes, anything –

"Ryuuuji! What are you doing you dilly-dallying nitw.. ...I mean, you silly, easy-going person! Come on, hurry up!"

".....Ou!"

"You're la~te. What were you doing? Geez, you really are dilly-dallying stupid nitwits~"

Inside the dusty and sweat-stinking gym storeroom was Ami. She was sitting on top of a layered mat with her legs thrown out, and next to her, Kitamura and the Student Council were hustling around and about.

Spotting Murase writing something on a white board, Ryuuji shouted, "Hey!" and slapped him on the butt. Murase, smiling, replied, "Yo," and turned his face toward him. They had met each other at the chaos before the Student Council elections. Since then, it turned out they had a surprisingly lot in common and have become friends. Murase, screwing around, ground the back of his pen against a box-holding Ryuuji's armpit, who then screamed for him to stooooooooooop it as he twisted his body.

Behind those filthy and unsightly men,

"There was a little accident! What's your prob.....wait, why are you here, Stupichi? What happened to your job? You're skipping aren't you."

"I'~m in charge of making little ornaments, with one of the Student Council first years~. So, we've split up the work, and I'm here making this thingy little by little. See, look! I'm pretty incredible don't you think?"

What Ami, sitting on top of the layer mat, scooped up with a tingle sound was a decoration made up of small bells tied across a long silkworm gut. It was to be entangled around a mini light strand and wrapped around the tree. Ami shook it with a proud look on her face to show it off, but at that moment,

"Uwah!? Wait, wait, wait, no! Why!?"

From the part that had been finished and so carefully coiled, a bell fell and jingled onto the mat. Ami frantically tried to pick up the rolling bell, but doing so, even more came jingling off. Taiga also went over to pick them up with her and said,

"Kyaa kyakya! That's our Stupichi! You klutz, you klutz! Haha, you have to redo it!"

"Why you.....is it okay for you to be saying that?"

".....What a regrettable accident."

Pushing aside an anti-Santa Taiga – who added an, " Oh, what a tragedy," and theatrically knelt down to present the bells she picked up to Ami – Ryuuji took a look at Ami's wrists. He'd been attending when the Committee had picked this out from a book. At that time, it looked like it was easy to make, but.

Ami pouted her cheeks, sat cross-legged, and glowered like she was the head honcho of a gang of prisoners.

"Che, why does this have to happen~? Aaah, I got this far after one hour but now look..... Ami-chan's not meant to do this kind of dull work! Yes, Ami-chan should be having a flashy, eye-grabbing role, one where her beauty, sweetness, fairness, cuteness, and pureness brilliantly stand out..."

Muttering nonsense, she fell backwards with a slam. Thanks to the absolutely unsexy lederhosen under her skirt, she didn't have to worry about a flickering glimpse of her panties, however, her back did make a pathetic snapping sound. Ryuuji sat next to that same Ami and smacked her white, protruding knee a few times.

"If you have time to whine, fix it. Hey, get up, look, see this. You tied this the wrong way. If you don't pass it through this loop too, everything's going to fall off."

Ryuuji skillfully passed the silkworm gut into the head of the bell, and showing it to her, made a tight knot and properly fastened it. *Ha?* was the reaction Ami gave as she sat up and tilted her head.

"How did you do that? Where did I go wrong? I couldn't see it because you were too fast. Do it one more time."

"Look, you.....do it.....like this"

Dexterous Ryuuji slowly moved his long fingers with easy-to-understand, large and slow movements for Ami. Ami brought her face so close he could smell her hair, and while seriously looking at his fingers, said,

"....No-way. Like, what a total hassle. .....So like, I have to fix everything? I don't believe it, I have to untie and redo, eeeeverything?"

"If you don't, they'll all jingle off the gut."

"Kyaa! You're kidding me!? Really!? This is the pits! This seemed like the easiest~! Hey, Yuusaku! It's just like I thought, I caaaan't do this by myself!"

Hearing his childhood friend and tilting his glasses with an "Eh?" Kitamura came out in a white shirt from the depths of the deep L-shaped storeroom. Dust was sticking heavily to his head, his school jacket was off, his sleeves folded, and in his hands, for some reason, was a rusty hurdle. In exchange for permission to use the gym, he was stuck with the task of cleaning out the storage room by the teachers. And this was the ugly result. He may be the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, but he was a newborn, green-horned, newcomer Student President, and he couldn't hold a candle to the previous President when it came to negotiating with the teachers.

"What, it's that much of a pain in the butt?"

"It's so, totally, totally, totally, a pain the butt! There's absolutely no way I can finish this by myself!"

"Erm....In that case, sorry Takasu, but could you help Ami? I already have Aisaka and the others working on the next task."

To the side of Kitamura, Taiga firmly held scissors and glue in her hands and was assigning tasks to the first years. Her eyes looked at Ryuuji and blinked like she just noticed him.

"Eh, Ryuuji? You won't work with us? We're going to make stars, a looot."

From behind her, Kitamura, easily standing one head taller than her, stooped down and told Taiga with a smile on his face. That, he thought about having Takasu help Ami out. Ryuuji didn't know if it was because she didn't have the time to blush from being distracted by the recent bustle, or if it was because she developed some degree of immunization, but when she nodded, it was with surprising calmness, yet bright eyes. *Ah, I see*, was her reaction.

Kitamura took the scissors away from klutzy Taiga's hands nonchalantly, and in its place, jokingly made her carry a far too massive load of paper patterns of stars. It looked like Taiga was about to drop it, but just when it looked bad, she narrowly recovered and smiled. Smiling closely at each other once, Taiga and Kitamura walked away into the depths of the storeroom.

– *Have to be rewarded.*

Before his thoughts could be gathered, the echoes of his previous thoughts revived in his ears. He immediately forgot what he was about to say. He also forgot whatever it was he was about to think.

Have to be rewarded. That's right.

Taiga's efforts, have to be rewarded.

"Oh my, oh my, they're getting along, Yuusaku and Tiger-chan. They look like quite the nice couple don't they~"

"....Shut up and work. At any rate, you untie everything up to here."

Ami, displeased, stuck her tongue out. Unlike Noto, Ami's face was cute even when her tongue was sticking out. However, ignoring that, Ryuuji sat on the mat by her and skillfully pulled out a new silkworm gut. He speedily began tying small bells to it. Ami poked his back ill-manneredly with her cross-legged knees.

".....Hey, hey, why don't we skip this. Nobody'll find out."

"No.....The hell, 'Ami-chan' is sure showing a damn lack of effort. I thought you were going to bust your butt and make the party take off?"

"I am busting my butt ~? I will make the party take off ~? Just watch, Ami-chan will show you just, how, amazing she is. .....But ~, I'm all pooped out today, the air's awful ~, it's totally cold and stinks like sweat~, the athletic clubs are going in and out and being noisy~, the softball girls from earlier were lifting barbells and squealing~. Oh right, they left juuuust before you guys came, kind of?"

"I said work."

Kyaha ♥, laughed Ami, and looking at the others going about doing their jobs busily, she curled her big eyes at Ryuuji.

"Aw, too bad. You could have met a certain someone if only you came just a little bit earlier. Ow!"

Putting a bell on the palm of his hand, he flicked it, hitting Ami on the nose. Ryuuji narrowed one eye, indicating that he couldn't hear anything, and turned his back to Ami, who was covering her nose.

"What a creep. Unbelievable. So that's what you guys do, huh? Men's misplaced bouts of anger are sooo freaky. Don't take your frustration out on me just because you're drifting farther away from Minori-chan. It's not my fault. "

"No duh. Who ever said that?"

".....Oooh nasty temper, nasty attitude."

"Because you aren't doing your job."

"Okay, okay, I'll do it. See, see, I'm doing it, I'm doing it.... Yeah, I can understand why Takasu-kun's not in a good mood though. You've been doing nothing but getting off on the wrong wavelength with the girl you like, and I'm getting the vibes that Tiger-chan's going to be merry, and poor Takasu-kun's going to be left all by himself - Owowowow!"

He silenced her with three flicks to the forehead. He shut her up and then, a light bulb went off in his head.

"It was you, wasn't it!? You did it! You're the one responsible for that weird gossip!"

"Ha~~~a!? I don't know what you're talking about!"

Not falling victim to the pretty face staring at him, he brought his face closer and said with as low a voice as possible,

"I mean.....! That Taiga...l-likes Kitamura! It looks like everybody wants them to be together! You,"

"HOW THE HELL SHOULD I KNOW!?"

Having been finger-flicked in the forehead, no, more like, punched straight in the forehead, Ryuuji shut his mouth from the long-awaited return of female-induced violence. Now that he thought about it, it has been one week since Taiga stopped being violent. Waving her hand in pain, Ami snorted.

"Screw this~, why do I have to do this! Oh, and I knew about it of course, but I don't feel like supporting Tiger and Yuusaku. I never gave a crap about them, and *Ms. "I love you Maruo ♥"* Maya is being hysterical. But, I'll agree with the rest of the class about them actually looking like quite the couple. Heh, when people like that keep getting closer like that, one day, they'll end up dating, right~. Then, what will you do~? Does it bother you~?"

"That's fine. If that's it. I just... have the feeling... that there's something wrong about a mob jumping up and down and saying stuff about other people's romances. That's all."

"Really~~~~"

After Ami looked at Ryuuji's mumbling face, the nasty sparkle in her eyes returned.

"Aha~ ♥ So, you feel like a father sending off his daughter as a bride~?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never had a daughter and I never had a father."

"The woman you treasured so very dearly for a~ll this time – kept her from falling, from getting hurt, from crying, from getting injured, from getting sick, from dying – is being swiped away by another man. A guy who might not treasure her as well as you did. A guy who might not be able to protect her, snatches her out of your nest after all you did to raise her, just when she became so pretty..... Daddy doesn't get rewarded. Even if he doesn't want to, even if he's unrewarded, he has to let go. Do you know why? Because Daddy's going to

become old and die first. He has no choice but to entrust his daughter to a healthy man who will live longer than him 'cause he's instinctively afraid of leaving his daughter alone in the world after he dies."

What the, he thought.

Taiga's real father wasn't somebody special like that. He was a ridiculously self-centered bastard that had no problems in throwing out his unprepared daughter. And Ryuuji wasn't Taiga's father. No way was he going to let himself have a daughter of the same age as him at 17. Also, there's plenty of women that are separated from their fathers, unmarried, and can live by themselves. Like Yuri-chan from the Koigakubo family or Yasuko-chan from the Takasu family. They weren't daughters left to fend for themselves powerlessly, but were adults with enough power and knowledge to get by in the world. And, that isn't the only problem.

"What? What you just said is really discriminatory. You're a 'daughter' too. Don't mock your own kind."

"That's not what I'M thinking~. Smart Ami-chan is just putting into easy words what Takasu-kun is thinking~."

"That's not how I think. Cut the crap."

He brushed off what Ami was saying with a snort and tried to focus on the silkworm gut and the bells. He was carefully passing the gut through a small hole at the head of a bell. But, it didn't go through and he tutted. It's not easy.

"But it bothers you, doesn't it~? Looking at Yuusaku and Taiga together. I can tell from your face. That's why you're in such a bad mood, it's twisted~. Even though you're not her father, even though it's not like you'll die of old age before her, Takasu-kun's treasuring, really treasuring the one woman you've decided to 'absolutely never touch.' You've already got a wife set in your mind, and the three of you, like you're playing house, understand your roles, as Papa, Mama, and Daughter."

"...Ah, I've had enough of this!"

"Hey. What are you going to do?"

This wasn't sarcasm or nastiness. She looked at him quietly. Her two somewhat cold, dark brown eyes looked at him as if they could see through anything. Ami tried forcefully to see what was in the bottom of Ryuuji's heart with such directness that prevented him from moving.

"I mean it. If Taiga and Yuusaku get together, what will Takasu-kun do? You don't care? As long as you get together with Minori-chan, it doesn't matter what happens to her?"

He blinked. Licking his dried lips and forgetting to even breathe in front of Ami's gaze, he then finally remembered. He didn't have to answer Ami's question. However, when he tried to turn his face, his jaw was grabbed like he was a girl about to be kissed. He was captured by surprising power and was dragged in at point blank. He was looked at by frighteningly large eyes and was questioned again.

"Are you fine with that? Hey, why are you playing the Papa? When did that happen? Was it like that from the beginning?"

"I told you, I don't remember ever acting the part."

Even if he averted his eyes, even if he had a way of a way of knocking away the hand grabbing his jaw, he couldn't run away from Ami's voice.

"What are you saying? You are so totally doing it."

"......Ch."

"Takasu-kun and Taiga's relationship, is reeeallly unnatural. It's freaking strange. You should stop playing this childish game. It must have been mistaken from the beginning. Why don't you wake up before someone gets really hurt? End everything. Then, you can start from scratch. Put me in too. Not as a factor that appeared in the 'middle' of an already developed relationship, but from the start line. Put me in too. And then, be more...be more.....I...I,"

– *Don't know*, then Ami shut her mouth. Then she quietly said, *whatevah*.

Ami turned her face to the side once, and in the next moment, formed a smile with her mouth. Then, she whispered with the face of an angel, "Forget everything I said."

He couldn't forget, but he might be able to act like he did. But Ryuuji couldn't find words to say and he looked back at Ami's smile, unable to move even his frozen hands. Ami picked up the silkworm gut and a bell with her white hands, untied the gut, and dropped the bell onto her lap. It was more trouble to undo a mistake and fix it instead of tying bells onto a new gut. Doing that, she murmured quietly to herself,

"... When it comes down to it... the person whom everyone understands the least is themselves."

That was it. The side of her face was covered by fallen hair and could barely be seen. The rush of people coming and going had their hands full with themselves and didn't notice that the fake angel on the mat had said anything.

From that point on, he couldn't see even a trace of the Christmas-only, donut-halo'ed angel.

* * *

It was the last day of the term finals.

All the tests ended before noon and homeroom was full of noisy clamor. Even though everyone should've been exhausted from the three consecutive days of tests, their young bodies were fidgeting to leave from the feeling of liberation, and they were already in the winter vacation mood. They were imagining Christmas, and some were even dreaming as far as New Year's presents.

"People, I keep telling you to be quiet! Okay!? Go straight home and don't fool around outside, do you understand!? There are still normal classes tomorrow and

the day after, so don't go into winter vacation mode yet! Are-you-listening-to-me!??"

The bachelorette homeroom teacher strained her voice, but there wasn't a chance in the world that there would be people obediently shutting up in this class. They were finally freed from test studying, and though she might have said there were still normal classes, it was not as if there was going to be anything beyond handing out and explaining tests. And what remained was the closing ceremony – and what they were anticipating on Christmas Eve, the large party at the gym to be attended by most of the class. There's no such thing in the world as a seventeen year old that's able to be calm under these circumstances and silently sit in his seat.

Even so, all stood up exuberantly at Kitamura's class order to rise. At the same time that the farewell etiquette ended,

".....Yaaaahooooooooo! No more tests.....!"

"Yes~yes~, it's winter break! It's break~! Let's party~!"

"What should we eat, where do we go, what do we do on the way home~~~~~~?! Kya~~~~~~~~~~!"

The roar of the class was so loud that the 30 year old could no longer do anything but laugh awkwardly shook the 2-C classroom at once. Similar uproar surely must have been happening in the other classes too. There was laughter and shrilling chatter here and there in the classroom, and soon, kids were dashing to the hallways like they were racing against each other, like they were trying to escape from prison as quickly as they could. Ryuuji as well, finished packing his bag and placed it on his desk. He stretched, bending his stiff shoulders and back. He had the feeling that the results may be his best ever. The major points summed up simply in the Bro Notes had appeared in the tests so much it was funny.

"Hyo~! It's over! Hey, hey, let's get out of here and eat! Ruaaamen!"

"There shouldn't be Prep Committee work today right?"

"Ou, actually, today's a little..."

He ambiguously dodged answering the double "Eh!"s with a scratch to the head. He hadn't made any plans for the part after, "Today's a little....," but he decided to

tentatively turn them down, in keeping with his wishful thinking on a certain matter. Shrugging off the invitation of his friends, Ryuuji was looking straight ahead to the right. Because of his lack of sleep, his two bloodshot, curse-, whoops, hopeful eyes were protectively glued to the exchange between two girls.

One was Taiga. Forgetting to undo her long hair pinned back for the tests, she was trying very hard to talk . The other was Minori. She listened to Taiga, with her front hair loosely bunched together like a Kewpie doll (or Daigorou), again probably because of the tests.

After shaking her head and crossing her arms, Minori soon closed her eyes with a stern look. Come on, nod, please say yes, cheered Ryuuji secretly. Clenching the sweat in his fists, he li~cked his lips chapped from the dry air and took coarse breaths because of his nervousness.

Huff, huff, one more li~ck, clench, huff, huff, li~~~~~ ck~..... "Oh no, Takasu-kun's going wild~" "He's probably just fantasizing about something like end-of-year cleaning." "Yeah. Actually, that's kind of scary itself." "Yeah, that's actually kind of dangerous." ....Huff, huff, clench, huff, li~~~~~~ck. Unaware of the

terrified glances of the girls around him, Ryuuji huffed as he waited for Minori's response.

But maybe his cheering wasn't good enough.

"Sorry! I'za gotta be going to practice next!"

Sorry! Minori apologized and suddenly gripped Taiga by the waist and pushed her out of an imaginary ring with her strength as imaginary drums went rat-a-tat-tat.

Ryuuji, who didn't even have a cushion to throw, went back a little and dropped his shoulders. And as if to give him another kick in the groin, Taiga, having recovered her footing, looked back at Ryuuji nonchalantly, stuck her tongue out like she'd been strangled, and made the gesture of her head being decapitated with her thumb – It wasn't nonchalant, but anyway, she gave him the negative sign. Yes, he already heard you two.

It had been Taiga's suggestion to invite Minori out for lunch with her and Ryuuji. However, the operation was a failure, and Taiga returned to Ryuuji in shame.

"Sorry. Minorin, she's got her club....."

"I know, I know, I heard."

"Guaa!"

"I said I know."

She made another neck cutting gesture, maybe because she wasn't confident that he understood her. It became increasingly less lovely once he saw it up close, and while he felt sorry, he had to look the other way by reflex . But at that moment,

"Ah. Sorry, for real, I'm sorry that I have to turn you guys down."

"Ou. .....No, well, I just, thought that, it's been a while since w.....you and Taiga had a decent chat with each other."

"Nah, the coach has fallen completely to the Dark Side, so practice's been rough."

For the first time in days, by coincidence....well, not a coincidence... Thanks to a near miss, he was able to hear Minori's voice up close. Minori laughed and swung her little top-knot.

"About your hair. Are you, okay with keeping it like that?"

"Eh? My hair? What? .....Oh!? Gyao!"

She apparently forgot that she tied her bangs up. Minori touched her hair with her hands after Ryuuji pointed at it, noticed the protruding Daigorou, and hastily pulled the rubber band off. "Tell me earlier, TA-TA-TA-TA-TA-TA, done!" said Minori, unleashing a flurry of strikes in the secret channeling points on Taiga's forehead, who then fell down backwards without uttering a sound. Then,

"Whoah, oh crap! I have to go like this now! Aaaah, it's all weird now.....oh, no!"

While she held down her bangs which were flipping back in strange directions, her cheeks turned red. Muho! Ryuuji coughed. While the weird hair was funny, an obviously-embarrassed Minori was so cute it affected his lungs.

"Shouldn't Kawashima have some styling gel or something in her locker?"

"No, that's fine, I'll use water. ....No, forget it, I'll just put this on."

Minori shook her head strongly, took out the uniform cap that was sticking out from the pocket of her sports bag, and forced it down hard as if she wanted to cover her whole face.

"Ou, phew. I almost thought you were going to take out the bald wig.....but you're going to be losing hair if you wear that inside."

"I care not, YOU'RE in SHOCK!! Baldness comes falling down on me!! TO~O KEEP MY HAIR STAY FLAT DOWN..... Ah, lost my voice. Oh well, who cares! Okay , see you guys tomorrow!"

Then, without even giving them the time to wave back at her, she flipped her body around and had quickly vacated the premises. She was gone like the wind and hadn't even let them say goodbye.

He realized there was more stuff he wanted to talk about with her after she was gone. Like, about how effective the Bro Notes – which Minori had ended up not

using – were, or how she should come to the party since preparations were moving along fine and most of the class was coming.

He wouldn't let her get away next time. Ryuuji then buttoned his opened school jacket with an agonized face. Che, intestines spilled forth from his sliced-open stomach .....What a laugh....Of course not. In the first place, he couldn't laugh at something like that. He simply put some willingness and effort into it. Next time, he will definitely, definitely, not let her get away. There were normal classes tomorrow and the day after, so he still had plenty of chances.

In order for his efforts to be rewarded, in order for him to have a happy Christmas, he will definitely invite Minori out to the party. In order to see Minori's real smile, he will sincerely invite her.

"Ah, that took me off guard, blood isn't gushing from my forehead right?"

".....Gushed.....You're going to be in serious trouble if that happened."

After being knocked on to the floor by striking her secret channeling points, Taiga finally stood up. Rubbing her forehead, she sighed with disappointment.

"Minorin got away again."

"She has to go to her club and there's nothing to do about that. I don't mind since there's still time left."

"Aaaah.....You're being an unusually good loser, or unusually understanding. And here I was, thinking that I'd give you two a chance to be alone together. I would have gone up to the front of the restaurant, then deliberately say, 'Ah! There was something I had to do!' or something."

"Lord Angel Taiga is sure fired up. Enough to even prepare such a touching lie."

Now with time on his hands, Ryuuji looked around the classroom. Kitamura, who is intensely busy, wouldn't be here, and it looks like Noto and Haruta already went out to eat ruaaamen. It was awfully sad to be stuck with no one to eat lunch with, even when it was the last day of

exams and it was the first time in a while that he was free of responsibilities. But wait, there was still someone left. Right in front of him.

"Ah, oh fine, let's go eat something.

"No, I wasn't lying, there's something I have to do, really."

Eh!? was Ryuuji's reaction, who then unwittingly acted like a punk kid and fired eyebeams at Taiga's hair swirl.

"What do you mean you have stuff to do!"

"I have to go to the post office for a bit. After I finish that, I'll just go eat somewhere outside."

"What's up with that? Why don't you just go to the post office and eat with me after? I'm okay with making something at home."

"I have to go back once and carry some packages down there. And, hey, why are you being such a pe-....."

"Pe? Ou, just say the rest of that. Me and Santa are listening."

".....A pe, st, no it's not that, it's just, there are these times when I f, fuh, fee, feel like not feeling like feeling like not feeling like feeling like not feeling like that I feel that we should keep a certain distance between ourselves .....?"

"........? "

It doesn't look like she even understood what she said. Taiga frowned and began leaning gradually like the leaning tower of Pisa. Ryuuji, the one listening, also began leaning. Just when the two were facing each other, mirroring the other and slanting at about 35 degrees,

"There he is! Takasu-kun, hey, hey, hey, hey! Are you free!? You are, right, right! I need some advice! How about having lunch with us!? You'll be the only guy in the group, but you don't mind, right!? Right!?"

The one aggressively coming at him with desperation that made him want to take a step back on reflex, was Maya. Behind her were a slightly-smiling Nanako and Ami, wearing a malicious smile, seemingly taking pleasure in seeing how Ryuuji was going to act. Judging by Maya's right and left eyes, he was getting the vibes that "Maruo's case" and "Tiger's case" were written in

them respectively. Also, on her forehead were the words, "The tests are over so we better start thinking!" In spite of it being an invitation from the 2-C Official Beautiful Girl Trio, the truth was that he had the feeling that this was going to be a little.....more like, a major pain in the butt. So, without bothering to think about it,

"Ah, uh.....sorry. There's stuff I have to do."

And so, he lied.

"Eh!? Really!? If that's the case, I'll wait!?"

"Ah, uh, no, I have to go to the post office."

"Then I'll go with you! We'll have lunch after!"

"I have to carry packages from Taiga's house..... If it's okay to bring Taiga along, then,"

Of course it isn't! was in her right eye. *Read between the lines!* was in the left one. Maya had spoken eloquently with only the colors of her eyes, however, she kept her mouth shut and reluctantly withdrew. While brushing up her long, beautifully colored hair,

".....Okay, fine. But, next time, you'd better help me. ....
.After all, we're birds of a feather, and if I go down, you go down,...."

Secretive mumbling trickled into Ryuuji's ears. He had the feeling that clearing up her misunderstanding is going to result in a bigger hysteria. And, at the moment, he didn't have that energy.

So, bidding a quick adios and waving his hand in a rush to the trio, Ryuuji then got a dazed Taiga to carry her bag, and pushing her small back, fled to the hallway.

As they descended down the stairs leading to the entrance side by side, Taiga looked at Ryuuji's face briefly.

"What was that? You even lied? And what is with that valley girl that I've started to become acquainted to because she's been cozy-dozy with Kitamura-kun? Is she forcing you to do something? .....Whoops, ignore that, one more time, I wonder what that suh, sociable Kihara-san wanted?"

"Dunno, beats the hell out of me. Let's just go to the post office already. It won't be a lie if we really go."

Taiga, for one moment, narrowed her eyes with real displeasure, but apparently, "good girl" mode prevented her from being able to find a way to turn down Ryuuji's persistent request. "Geez.....," she moaned quietly like a cow, gave up, and walked home with Ryuuji, just the two of them.

"....You, were, going, to carry this.....by yourself?"

"Yeah, so? I did this last year too. One cart in each hand."

The rumbling and squeaking wheels of his cart conveyed to him the unevenness of the asphalt street by the tickling in the palms of his hands. Taiga and Ryuuji were each pushing a cart, but it started to feel like to him that they were competing to see who'd break first from the weight.

The distance between the area of town that they lived in and the post office had a travel time of more than 15 minutes even when walking normally. And to get there, one would have to brave a painfully steep hill, go down the narrow, sharply-sloping, and winding "Snake Hill,"

oh and, cross the pedestrian walkway. Incidentally, the north wind was cold and strong enough to numb his throat. It was so cold that he couldn't keep his eyes decently opened.

He hadn't dreamed that he'd ever wind up making that kind of journey with stuff as big as this. The noble part of him that felt great about helping out and his honest feelings about his decision being a bit rash came and went in cycles. Either way, he was about to reach his limit – but a little bit ahead of that same, close-to-whining Ryuuji, Taiga was silently pulling a cart just as heavy. She walked, the parts of her dress underneath her coat fluttered in the wind, and the heels of her boots clicked the ground.

When Ryuuji had went to her apartment after changing, Taiga had already clumsily but firmly bound the heavy packages with packaging cords to both carts. The piled-up packages were very heavy and quite big. There were several bags beautifully wrapped.

"So, what is this stuff?"

"....Stuff I'm mailing. Look, we've arrived. Watch out for the steps. Heave,"

Ho! And raising their voices in unison at the entrance of the post office, the two of them each lifted up a heavy cart. Wobbling uncouthly like crabs, they passed the three-step stairs. Unfortunately, the words "No Barriers" apparently belonged to a far-off land. The door wasn't an automatic one, so Taiga, her back against the door, had no choice but to ill-manneredly push open the door with her butt while holding the cart. Ryuuji was the one that was being persistent about coming with her, so it wasn't his place to complain, but it was a really, tough, trip.

And once inside that small post office that had taken so long to reach,

"Eh!? What is this, what is this line!"

"Ou.....now this is an exhausting sight....."

What they were shown was a terribly crowded hubbub of men and women of all ages. Maybe it was like this because it was nearly the end of the year, or maybe it was the gift-giving season, or maybe it just happened to be the middle of lunchtime for the nearby companies, but anyway, the narrow space was packed with so many people that it was muggy – in fact, there was a good chance he could catch a cold with one wrong move.

However, no one was lining up at the only delivery window in the building, and thinking, "Oh," Ryuuji approached it, only to be stopped by a service worker. He was told to draw a number slip from the machine, and when he drew a paper strip, digital numbers told him that there were seven people waiting. Exactly just what is there behind simply delivering something that warranted waiting that long?

"Aaaah, we picked the wrong time to come. Nothing to do but sit on the sofa, huh.....Hey, there's not even anything to sit on."

"Oh, don't fuss. Could you watch over the packages over there for a minute? I don't have the address labels all in order yet, so I'll use this time to fill them out right over there."

Got it, and Ryuuji forced the two carts to the walls and saw off the fluttering hem of Taiga's long skirt while he tapped his grating hip. He figured that he'll undo the cords holding down the packages for her while she's away, so he brought his fingers to a tight knot,

"....."

His hands automatically stopped.

The words – *What is this?* – leaked out from Ryuuji's mouth.

He didn't intend to look. But he saw it. On this beautiful and large box, wrapped in festive Christmas paper and even ribboned, was an already-attached address label.

The name that accompanied the metropolitan prime spot address that was written on the label, was Aisaka Rikurou – He couldn't believe it. He found another package just like that. This time, with clear intent, he looked at it. It had the same address, and the name was Aisaka Yuu.

"Hey, could you put this on the one on the bottom, the big one.....what?"

"What, the hell is this? What are these names?"

It wasn't his place to complain. He didn't have the right. He knew that, but he still couldn't bear to say nothing. He couldn't stop himself from asking. Ryuuji looked like he was going to have a bout of vertigo from the shock, but in front of him, Taiga's expression did not change at all.

"I could have had these sent directly at the department store, but I wanted to send them together with cards and the stuff I bought at the other stores. And I decided I'd send them myself. So, at the department store, I purchased knit zip jackets that they could wear when they're golfing. A grey and pink set, the brand goods they'd like. Then there's Marriage Frerestea tea, ceramic glasses that'd go well with drinking beer, and,"

"Not,"

His voice got entangled in his throat and he coughed once. He started over again.

"Not that! Your father and your stepmother? You're sending them Christmas presents? Are you serious!? Are you sane!? !"

"If it wasn't Christmas, I'd hit you for looking at my stuff without asking. But I'll forgive you. These are just Christmas presents that I'm sending to my father's place, and I am serious and sane. Is that good enough?"

"Why are you doing this!"

"Because it's Christmas. And, he's my father. And, I wanted to keep it a secret, but I also got presents for you and Yacchan. Oh right, back on Sunday, when I said I was going to study at home, I was actually shopping at the department store, and then,"

"I'm not talking about that!"

Taiga momentarily closed her mouth. Apparently, it wasn't because she was overpowered by Ryuuji's sudden , large voice. Rather, she looked carefully at a shaken Ryuuji, calmly and with composure. Her breathing was relaxed, and as if she was going to teach him how to have a rational conversation, she spoke quietly.

"The truth is, I know what you want to say. But, I don't want to hear it. That's why I didn't want you to come."

The reason why Ryuuji fell silent this time wasn't because he was overpowered.

– *Does she really understand? If she understands, why is she* – It was because he couldn't organize these questions that were rushing up his throat and turn them into words that he fell silent. *Why Taiga, why,* he thought.

Even if it was Christmas, he couldn't believe that she was giving gifts to the father that abandoned her and even the stepmother that was the reason for that. Even though she normally had nothing to do with them because of all of their betrayal and pain, even though she hates their guts, why does she have to be nice to them? Just what kind of performance demanded her to " artificially" go about like her relationship with her parents was in good shape and send presents to them? If this was just a gigantic act of sarcasm, it would have made sense.

But, the reason was, "because it's Christmas," and he couldn't fathom it. Even Ryuuji felt like he was betrayed by Taiga's father. Back then, Ryuuji was also hurt, he was still hurt, and even now, he hated him. Yet, how could Taiga be...

Unable to believe this, Ryuuji continued to only look at Taiga's face. Taiga, apparently, decided to leave him be. She only took a short breath and indifferently continued to work. She patted and flattened labels on the top of the cardboard boxes with her small, child-like, white hands. This too, was strange.

The labels were written in script so beautiful that at one glance, he couldn't tell what language they were written in. Once he took a good, good look, he could tell that the destination address was Tokyo, but the return address column wasn't marked with Taiga's name nor the address of this city. In its place, there was only a name beginning with the letter S –

".....Santa, Claus....."

"A volunteer. That kind of thing..... It's our turn. If you're not feeling uncomfortable about it, help me out."

The addresses that the old man at the counter read aloud to make sure there weren't any mistakes, were the addresses of several churches and child welfare organizations.

* * *

She said that the all-girls school she had attended near her family home since primary school was a Catholic one .

".....But I couldn't move up to high school. I'd been rejected entry for bad behavior."

Hearing the name of that school, one known throughout Japan as a traditional prestigious school for daughters of rich families, Ryuuji unwittingly stopped his hand from twirling up his 780 yen pasta (with drink, salad, and lunch soup). In front of him, Taiga, putting the same pasta in her mouth, continued to speak without noticing how he was looking at her.

"Volunteer activities were mandatory at that school and we would travel to churches and foundations with the sisters. There, it was compulsory for us to play with and do chores with what people call – I don't like the phrase, but – .....'unfortunate....children'. Those packages back at the post office are being sent to the churches and organizations I've done volunteer work at before. They're all going to places where children who can't be with their parents live. Toys, sweets, books, manga, sports goods, wordbooks, dictionaries, illustrated books, character goods for school supplies....'Good girl' I may be, I can't

travel around the world and hand out Christmas presents and I didn't want to get swindled by a strange charity either. That's why I sent presents to places that I had ties with and did as much as I could do."

"......So what comes after your family is, unfortunate children, huh.....Hmmm....."

He knew that Taiga was looking back at him. But he still didn't feel like shutting up. He didn't want to criticize her, nor did he want to make her stop, but,

"Sorry, what your intentions are, are beyond me."

That was it.

He felt sick, not literally, by this over-the-top, un-" Aisaka Taiga"-like behavior. It was unsettling to him inside and he couldn't understand it at all. It was too artificial, too phony, and he had to ask her what her real intent was.

Taiga's true self is the spoiled, arrogant, self-centered, swaggering, most vicious and most powerful, Palmtop Tiger. At the same time, she is a girl that's unable to lie, doesn't know how to be deceitful, and so honest that she's clumsy. That was what Aisaka Taiga should be.

When Taiga had said that she'll be a good girl until Christmas, he had felt that this was a good thing, even though he thought that her reasoning was unnatural. The facts were that since then, Taiga didn't fight with anyone, not even Ami, didn't go on a rampage, diligently prepared for the party, and gained the trust of the people around her. Everything had been heading in a good direction. Ryuuji was able to spend his days peacefully without having to be exposed to Taiga's unreasonable and spoiled screaming. And in the case of Kitamura – so much that Ryuuji was becoming uneasy about it for reasons he didn't understand himself – Taiga was able to get closer to her crush.

But this, he felt that this was taking it past the limit. There was too much of a difference from the usual Taiga, and frankly, it even felt very fake; it went beyond his understanding.

Drinking a slightly weak soup, Taiga took one breath. Normally, she would scream, "You insolent dog!" at Ryuuji for pestering her, give him a double slap, and then be done with it, but it looked like Taiga was going to adhere to being "unlike herself," even here. Starting off by saying this was separate from her family, she then slowly said,

".....I want to let them know, that there is somebody watching."

She brushed up her long hair which spilled over her turtleneck sweater. She wiped the parsley on her lips with a napkin and began speaking.

"Christmas is the opportunity for this kind of stuff. I want them to know that even if they don't have parents to raise them, even if they can't believe in God, even if they can't believe in Santa, there's still somebody watching. I want to let them know that there is somebody that definitely exists that is pretending to be Santa Claus and sending them piles of toys and sweets. That there's somebody, somewhere in the world, that cares about them....I want them to know that, I want them to believe, I want to believe... This is kind of.....to satisfy myself. Yeah, to say it simply, it's self-satisfaction. That's all."

Her composed smile must have been one of self-mockery. After she shrugged her shoulders and laughed, Taiga poked the bacon in her pasta.

"Hypocrisy. Self-righteousness. It's exactly that. I know , I don't need you telling me that. What I'm doing isn't for

the children, but to satisfy my own craving to do this. I'm 'acting' like a good girl, for my own sake..... It's because, I, want to believe. That, 'someone, somewhere in the world, is definitely watching me'. In my case, it's Santa."

"....When you were talking about Santa, you weren't joking?"

"Stupid isn't it?"

Ryuuji could no longer reply. She was the one that was putting on the pale smile, but her eyes radiated powerfully and didn't yield.

".....I, really love Christmas. The town, the stores, everything is glittering, bright, and beautiful, and everyone - they all look like they're really having fun. To me, it looks like everywhere, everywhere, is brimming with happiness. And then I think, ah, if only I can be a part of that... I want to become a part of that happy scene – do good things, be a good girl, and then become one of those happy faces shining in the Christmas city. And, "

Who could have been able to say anything after looking at the shaking color in the depths of her covered eyelashes, after looking at Taiga's expression? What could he have said, Ryuuji wondered, still unable to say

anything and only listening. Taiga's voice, whispering quietly as if she were talking to herself, chipped slightly and seemed like it would fade out in the noise of the restaurant.

"And, you know, I really did meet Santa once. .....Then again, it might have been a dream....but, I remember it. It was when I was little. Papa and Mama were still at home, it was Eve, and I was sleeping under the tree in the living room. I think I was waiting for Santa. I woke up from the cold and then I saw it snowing outside the window. I got up and just when I got close... he was there. Santa. On the other side of the window. I was startled, and then I opened the window for him. Santa came in, drank the milk that I left for him under the tree, ate the biscuits, and then, he gave me a present. Then, he said – *If Taiga is a good girl, I'll come again*."

Her eyes weakly shook as she relived her memories, but then closed her mouth as if she were snapping out of a trance. She lowered her eyes to the corner of the table, as if she were trying to make up an excuse for herself to a silent Ryuuji.

"Anyway, it's a childish dream. I remember up to the point where I was trying to open the present and untied

the ribbon as my heart was pounding. But after that.... It was still a really happy dream. That's the only part that's true. This is the only precious Christmas memory I have. So, I want to be a good girl. I'm believing a dream; stupid , right? Believing that someone's watching, that's stupid isn't it? Don't you think that's weak?"

When she said that, there was only one thing that Ryuuji thought.

How do I answer without hurting Taiga? Nothing other than that.

Then slowly, Ryuuji shook his head. "I don't think so at all," he murmured clumsily. Taiga hearing that, deepened her smile and once again began to eat her pasta again. As he looked at her large mouth, cold silence fell onto Ryuuji's chest. And he wondered. Somebody that wants to believe that "someone is watching" is, basically, somebody that's grown up "without being seen by anybody". Taiga has grown up without being watched by anyone, with the exception of just one person – the Santa she met in her dream. The people other than Santa, all of them, didn't look at a maturing Taiga. On the shiny nights of Christmas Eves past, Taiga continued to be alone.

When he started into these deep wounds, this deep loneliness, what he felt was something close to fear. It was a bottomless darkness, similar to despair.

What should I do, he thought.

What should he do to comfort the loneliness of Taiga that had been building up until now, which wouldn't heal even as time passed? Taiga smiled and ate her pasta. She smiled as she said she loved Christmas. She smiled as she said she'll be a good girl ....The reason why she could laugh, it had to be because she'd become numb. She continued to be neglected, the pain inside torturing her entire body, and had come to think that it was normal.

If there was nothing he could do, then does this mean that he should leave her alone? That's not possible. But, but.

But. But.

"It's a dream, it's okay. It's not reality. I'm not clinging to something real. This is a dream, it's fantasy, it's imagination. That's why....I'll believe it, I'll believe that someone is watching, I'll keep being a good girl, and it's not being weak, right?"

Was it a dream, was it real?

It must have been a dream. It might have been just a one-in-a-time event that her bastard of a father cooked up on a whim, but even that would be just as fleeting as a dream to Taiga. It wasn't weakness, but it was sad, but if he honestly said that, he'll surely hurt Taiga.

"Sorry about badgering you about this so much. After you told me all that, I get it. Okay. I think, that you're doing a fine job at being a good girl. Thus, I grant you the right to eat dessert too!"

He smiled at her and pushed the dessert menu toward Taiga. Taiga said, "Ah, wait, wait," ate the remaining pasta with one slurp, and then began picking from a vast selection of desserts as her eyes sparkled.

To keep himself from realizing the powerlessness that struck him by surprise at this pasta chain in the early afternoon, Ryuuji put his chin into his hands.

They lived on the same planet, breathed the same air, walked beneath the same sky, had been side by side like family – but, in the end, he still hadn't *seen* her properly. He knew how hard it was to understand each other, but

his heart felt like breaking from his carelessness and inexperience. He discovered that understanding and not hurting were on a completely different level.

He didn't mind if he lost sight of someone going far away. He even believed that he would want to shout goodbye with love and sincerity to the back of that person that was leaving his road, the person that decided that she'd follow her own path. Ryuuji already knew that if people believed in "thinking of one another", they'd be fine no matter how far apart they were.

But.

What should he do for a person he couldn't help with his own hands, even when she was in pain and writhing even now, only several dozen centimeters away from him? If she at least yelled "Help me" – if she herself realized that she bore large wounds gushing blood, something might change, but...

This world probably has been made so cruel that she too, has to walk alone with her raw wounds still open. If this was true, then God and Santa don't exist in this world. There is no salvation, there is no one watching.

Chapter 4

December 23, 4 PM.

A mini truck from Kanou Shouten Ltd. entered from the school gate, and leaving tracks on the ground, pulled up along the entrance of the gym. At that instant, men lying in wait rushed over to express their thanks to the driver, the storekeeper of "Kanouya" – the major sponsor of the Cultural Festival, and the supermarket/home of the previous Student President (In other words, Kanou Sumire's old man). After each and everyone of them bowed once, they climbed onto the back of the truck, and let out a low cry of admiration of *Ooooo.....* from the amount of what it was carrying, and the beauty of the coloring of the parts sticking out from the packaging.

"Wow.....once we put this together, this is absolutely going be incredible.....!"

While Ryuuji was untying the cords with the others, his eyes couldn't help but widen. From what he could imagine from seeing these parts, the assembled form was most likely going to be considerably large and unbelievably gorgeous.

"Okay! Let's split up and carry this stuff!"

The Preparatory Committee members, including Ryuuji, raised their fists in the air and roared a "Yeah!" in response to Kitamura's jock voice. Even though it was the afterschool period, the tension of all was electrifying, as it should be, since what was loaded in the truck was the symbol of their party, the Christmas tree. Not only that, it was a fabulous one exceeding everyone's imagination, so it was natural for the voltage of the Committee members to have risen.

However, while it may have been a tree, it wasn't a real fir tree but an artificial one. The tray full of parts shined with a mysterious pearl feel, easily allowing them to imagine the beauty and magnificence of the completed tree. It even came decorated with several ball-shaped decorations, and among them, it seemed like there were ones with gold and silver tops. Someone that picked up a gold one shouted, "A big kintama! " and accordingly, received a low kick from at the back of the knees from Kitamura. Another student stole the ball from his hands, but it turned out that he already had one golden one, and realizing this, "Ah, crap....." Ryuuji, who had seen this

and blurted, “Pffft!” somehow felt like he lost and was frustrated. The box he was lifting was probably full of lights and cables.

He could hear the laughing yakking of the first years that were passing him from behind.

“Hey, isn’t this like totally full-blown!?”

“Better yet, can we put this thing together?”

“There’s no use in worrying, let’s just do it! Let’s try our best!”

Hearing that, Ryuuji also hastily increased his pace. Ou, let’s try our best! he replied mentally.

With waves of people, each held as many parts as they could and went one by one into the gym. As constructing the tree would take time, the Committee intended to finish assembling it today, then move it behind the stage in its completed form, take it out immediately after the ending ceremony tomorrow was over, and proceed with setting up the hall – The Committee members worked under that schedule.

And it was no wonder why this tree was a 'totally full-blown' one, since while the person that delivered it was old man Kanou of Kanouya, the real key player that acquired it was,

"Wa~o ♥ It's here! Guys, be sure to get all the parts together~! We can't finish it if we're missing even one piece! Fight, fight!"

Kawashima Ami, whom was busy with preparing small decorations with the other girls inside the gym. The girl team was also going wild at the entrance of the tree, screeched cheers of delight when they saw the parts that the men carried, and ran over to help. Ami as well, seeing Ryuuji, got up.

"What do you think!? What do you think about this tree! Are you starting to understand how amazing Ami-chan is!?"

She smiled triumphantly. Needless to say, he hung his head down and was struck with veneration for her majesty, Ami-chan.

"Yeah, I really got it. It's the best! You really are incredible! I'll admit it!"

"You see, you see, you see~!? Once it's put together, it'll really like totally, totally, totally, be beautiful!"

The tree came from a slightly early, magazine-sponsored, Christmas party for people in the fashion industry, at a new high-profile spot in the city. High-profile actors and gossiped actresses were also invited, and apparently it was a party of so large a scale that even reporters from wide shows tried to crash the party.

Ami was there as a model for the fashion show, the main event of the party, and right after finishing, she personally asked the host, "I'd like to have this tree~ ♥ If possible, for free ♥" The fine tree at the center of the hall was going to be disposed of after the party MOTTAINAI-ly, and allegedly, he happily let her have it. However, the problem was how it was going to be delivered.

Ami helped out with even the disassembly work, collected all the parts, and was given a lift by the staff of her magazine house, to bring those parts, for the moment, to the storage of her agency near the hall. Everything went well until that point. The school was a bit too far off to ask the driver to go to as a favor. Not only that, the

tree was too big and had too many parts to be able to send by a delivery service. The fact that Ami tried to pay from her own pocket was soon discovered by Kitamura who wouldn't allow it on the grounds that "it was over the amount that a high school student should spend on a school event." Of course, if costs were seriously being charged, the already sorrowful budget would drop in an instant.

The one there to save the day was old man Kanou of Kanouya. In order to help out with the event of the school that his daughter had once literally reigned over, on a weekday with work, he vroomed his mini truck downtown and went out of his way to drive to Ami's talent agency then doubled back, and transported the tree parts to the school completely free of charge.

An even hotter shout of appreciation leapt out into the air at the old pops, who joined the men and was carrying one package.

"Pops! Thank you!"

"That's our Bro's dad! You're the ultimate man! I love you!"

"I'm, going to shop from Kanouya from now on! I'll tell mom!"

"I think, the fish at Kanouya are the cleanest around the area. You're also thorough about labeling your vegetables with where they come from, you're careful to make sure we can see the faces of the producers, your Fauchon spice selection is perfect, and oh yes, that Kyoto vegetable event the other day was really fun! I bought the Manganji mustard and I was deliciously surprised by it! It would be wonderful if you ordered more! Ah, I will most certainly be going to the tuna butchering presentation! Tuna!"

One guy that strangely knew a bit too much about Kanouya was also mixed in the crowd, but the head of the Kanou family only laughed, happily and somewhat gruffly, then turned his back to the noisy kids. Over there ,

"Ah. .....Aah.....Hello....."

"......Hello....."

He encountered Taiga, who was carrying a box with different materials from the classroom. Taiga awkwardly

raised her chin up slightly, then lightly bowed her head. Of course she'd feel awkward. One month hasn't even passed since that incident, since Taiga got into a bloody fight with his own daughter and went with her homeroom teacher to apologize to him.

But, old man Kanou remained the perfect man. He quietly murmured only, "You look well," and looking at her from afar and nodding approvingly several times, deepened the wrinkles on his rough, sun-tanned cheeks, smiled with his eyes, and then, this time, left the gym for good.

"....Uwah, that was a surprise. Why is that Stupident's dad....."

Ryuuji told a petrified and eye-fluttering Taiga the new information he had just heard about yesterday.

"You know that first year girl in the Student Council? From what I hear, she's Bro's little sister."

"Eh!? .....Actually, I remember hearing about that. I completely forgot."

They passed their eyes over to one girl with a somewhat fluffy feel about her *oohing* and *aahing* at the

tree with the other first years. “.....They don’t look alike.” “.....No, they don’t look alike,” they said, nodding to one another. Their backs were interrupted by two person’s worth of continuous pounding, and to finish it off,

“C’mon, come on, do your jobs! Ami-chan got the best tree out there, so go put it together!”

Wham! The girl that pushed him so much that his legs became tangled against each other was Ami. Then, once realizing – thanks to the time they had to complain about this roughness – that the other people had already started to unpack the boxes, Ryuuji and Taiga hastily went to work.

A copy of the completed drawing was handed out by Ami and as he looked over it with several people that were saying, “This is....Ah, this is for the roots, huh?” “ What’s this for?” “Doesn’t that go on top?” parts were flipped over and fiddled with. It pretty much felt like they were trying to solve a gigantic puzzle.

Ryuuji, as well, grabbed one part, then

“Huh, it’s light. This is styrofoam, right?”

"The inside, yeah. Then, there's the coating. Believe me , once it's done, it'll be really beautiful, and with lighting, it'll be like glossy pearl.....Ah! That's right, we need spotlights! Yuusaku!"

He was abandoned by Ami and lost track of where to put what. Looking around uneasily for someone with a copy,

"Ah, Takasu-kun! That probably goes with this!"

"Which? Ou! You're right!"

Called by a person from a different class, Ryuuji scurried over. Once they fit the concave and convex parts to each other and pushed it with force, it certainly did fit completely. It's a perfect fit, he grinned, and he was grinned back at with a *thanks*! He then said that he did see other parts like this one, so he'll go pick them up, and thus, he ran off once more. As he scanned the scattered parts, one by one, he oddly thought that, no matter what happens, he sure wasn't going to be able to demonically transmigrate.

Back during the Student President elections, he used the reputation of his feared gangster face to force a

reluctant Kitamura to run – Operation "Kitamura Bait." He demonically transmigrated together with Taiga, the Palmtop Tiger, and entered the elections as an unredeemable villain. His objective was to be hated.

But, before he knew it, he's become completely friendly with the people from all the classes working with together in the Preparatory Committee. It was the same with Taiga too.

"Aisaka-san, you seem pretty light. Could you climb on my back and put this in?"

"Eh, but these are the shoes I wore when I went to the bathroom!? .....Well, I supposed everyone has their own fetishes...."

"....Um, please take them off...."

Taiga, at a place a little farther off, was talking and laughing about this and that with girls whose names Ryuuji hadn't even known. Of course, there were those fans going – *Tiger-san's tights, Bare legs, This is exciting, It's coming, her foot stamp!* – and getting incomprehensively riled up, but let's just ignore them for now.

Yeah. I'm glad.

Ryuuji was able to honestly think so. His lips gradually formed into a faint smile. Ever since the day before yesterday, when he heard about Taiga's feelings towards Christmas, he had felt like he was choking the whole time. Taiga's loneliness, his powerlessness, a lot of other stuff – there was really a lot of stuff that he had been thinking about aimlessly, and unable to find answers, he couldn't breathe easily. He even went out of his house, saying he was going to the convenience store, and continued to walk for an hour, looking for stars in the night sky and thinking.

But now, he could finally breathe a sigh of relief and look at Taiga from afar. It was a fact that Taiga was standing in the abyss of a deep loneliness he still couldn't begin to imagine. And on that matter, even now he felt completely powerless.

But, hasn't Taiga been having a crazy but fun time with new friends this year? And, tomorrow, she'll be having a happy Christmas with everyone, with Kitamura , right? Of course, he will be there too. He hasn't given up on getting Minori to come either.

Taiga isn't alone – This fact made him happy, made him feel grateful, and Ryuuji, despite how busy a time it

was, stopped moving so he could watch Taiga working hard at assembling the tree. He remembered the warmth of how old man Kanou looked at her. And, that's right. There's the Bachelorette (30) too. Not all the adults have abandoned Taiga. Even if they won't protect her just as her parents didn't, they were concerned for her – they were on her side. I'm glad, he whispered inside his chest.

Even if there hadn't been "someone" watching her for the seventeen years of her life, in this year's Christmas Eve, everyone was here. And for this year's Christmas, he, Yasuko, and Inko-chan were here. He'll prepare a large feast and welcome Taiga into the Takasu family.

No matter how cruel the world may be, Taiga is smiling this year. She's already become a part of that sparkling, happy scene. Taiga doesn't have to wait for a " someone" that doesn't exist and stand by herself under a tree anymore. She'll spend tomorrow, that happy Christmas Eve that she dreamed of, noisily and busily laughing with everyone this year.

Then on the next day, they'll have a Christmas meal at home; towards the tumultuous end of the year, they'll do the "end-of-the-year cleaning" project that he'd been so fired up on; and on New Year's Eve, they'll watch stupid

variety shows with Yacchan until midnight then quietly enter the New Year. New Year's Day is the key to a successful year and he planned on definitely experiencing the midnight bell tolling and the first sunrise of the year with her. Yes, it will be a new year in just one more week. He wasn't going to let Taiga even have a bit of time to feel any further loneliness during this turbulent time of year.

At first, Ryuuji had been diligently working so he could spend Eve with Minori. This was still his number one task. He continued to work hard because he wanted to see Minori's smile. But, now, with importance of just about the same weight, he wanted to color Christmas Eve brightly with the smiles of everyone – what was necessary for Taiga to happily wake up to a Christmas morning.

Minori. Taiga. And, himself. Ami, the Student Council, the guys in the Preparatory Committee, Noto, Haruta, everyone, everyone here, and all those not here.

If everyone wasn't happy – if everyone wasn't rewarded, he couldn't complete it. Ryuuji had pictured a ring-like relay. Someone would pray for someone's happiness, someone would receive that someone's

happiness and then smile, and then, someone else who saw that would smile. They'll continue to pass the baton of happiness 'round and 'round, and that's when the relay will become a reality for the first time. If one person was missing, the ring will fall apart. And because of that, Ryuuji also was desperately trying to pass that baton.

He smiled and looked at the imaginary baton in his hands.

".....Taiga! This probably goes with that!"

"Waiwaiwait....Ryuuji! What are you doing, that's dangerous!"

Ryuuji hurled up a part with the same shape to Taiga, who was sitting on the shoulders of one of the girls and mounting the higher parts onto the tree. When she tried to catch it, she nearly lost her balance, and disapproving shouts of "Takasu-kun!" "Be serious!" came from the girls. Hihihi, he laughed and his face warped into a bloody demon crawling out from hell – He was just kidding a little of course. The days of him being feared of for no reason were over. ..... Luckily for him, he didn't notice the uninformed boy in front that screamed "Eek!" and gulped for no reason

Before long, the Student Council brought – a bit belatedly – several step ladders, firmly boosting their efficiency. The parts haphazardly assembled from what could be understood, finally began to gradually look like a real tree,

".....Uwaah, it's huge!"

"This is really huge!"

Soon, it began to reach a height that no one could reach without a stepladder. This was probably larger than three meters. The role of standing on top of a fully extended ladder and doing the nerve-wracking work belonged to the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts , the Student President, Kitamura. While receiving directions from below like, "That's wrong" "Eh...." "That 's wrong too" "Oh....." from his childhood friend, the one person who knew what the completed tree looked like, he gradually made the intricately sharp tip of the tree.

The glossy pearl white tree was tall, however, the width of the cone which protruded out like a skirt, was also considerably big. The parts that had seemed to be like puzzle pieces, once put together, looked like fist-sized cubes pasted onto a deformed tree shape.

Everyone crowded around, fitting the parts in and dressing the tree with handcrafted ornaments, mini lights , ribbons, and silkworm guts tied with bells. They may have been handmade, but the ornaments, carefully made under a silver and blue motif, should go very well with the pearl white tree. Once the enormous round decorations that were transported with it (the silver balls and kintama!) are hung on the tree, it will look even more outstanding. No longer were there any idiots that would dare to make vulgar jokes when there were girls around, either (but they're kintama!).

Then, once Kitamura attached the final part, Taiga called out to him from below.

"Kitamura-ku-n! I brought this from home! Put it at! The top of the tree!"

"Ah, stop! Don't throw, don't throw! I'll come down and pick it up!"

Kitamura smoothly climbed down the ladder and looked at the box Taiga was holding.

Then,

".....Are you sure!? Something this beautiful.....or, more like something this expensive....."

Kitamura asked her with widened eyes, but Taiga nodded happily.

"It's all right. It was from my parents' place, but it's a little too big to put on the tree in my apartment."

The ornament that Kitamura took out from the box with reverence was considerably larger than Taiga's face, transparent with the tinge of strong light, and possessed a complicated three-dimensional structure – it was a star. *Waa.....!* the girls shouted from its beauty. *Waa.....!* joined Ryuuji casually, as his evil eyes glimmered besides the girls.

"It's crystal. This is....my favorite ornament. It's a real shame not to be using it at all, so it's okay. Could you put it on top of the tree for me?"

".....Okay! I will! I'll put your favorite star, at the top of the tree!"

Climbing up the ladder once again, Kitamura tightly fitted Taiga's star at the crown of the tree. As if to see if it

was firmly in place, he gently removed both of his hands and poked at it lightly with his fingers. Seemingly satisfied, he said, " .....OK!" and pushed up his glasses and nodded. From far off, Ryuuji saw Taiga's cheeks soften into a smile. By coincidence, their eyes met, and Taiga, laughing, "Hehe~," rumpled her face like she was blushing. Happily wriggling her body too. It's okay, you don't have to worry. You can blush or wriggle as much as you want.

Then.

".....Extension cord is set!"

".....Outlet is set!"

"Okay, turn off the lights!"

Following Kitamura's voice, one by one, lights began to fade out beginning at the entrance. The blackout curtains were already closed, and in this gym, so cold that it felt like his fingers were numb, darkness fell slowly.

Everyone stood there, looking at the tree silently. The exhaustion from work and their prayer-like anticipation, stole the voices from all their mouths.

".....Power, on."

Several power switched were clicked noisily. Soon, there was light in the darkness –

There was trembling, like an electric current, at the back of Ryuuji's neck.

There was the shining of joy inside Taiga's eyes.

There was the small sound of, "....We did it," from Ami's lips.

Smiles bloomed simultaneously on the many faces floating amidst the light. After the brief silence, someone clapped. The sound of clapping expanded as if resonating. ".....We, did it!" "It's finished!" "Oh wow, oh wow, isn't this beautiful!?" Shouts of cheering sprung up everywhere. Joy, excitement, applause, cheering, and smiles. Ryuuji whistled and powerfully clapped his hands. He high-fived Kitamura, who came up next to him, with his right hand, and staying in that pose, the two of them both made a fist pump. He laughed hard enough to cut his dry lips. Even Kitamura laughed so much that his glasses tilted downwards.

Shining in the darkness, the tree was truly beautiful.

White light illuminated the base of the tree, and the tree sparkled like glossy pearls. The bulbs blinked on and off in yellow, flashing off of the ornaments. And, at the top of the tree, Taiga's shining star, catching all of the light and radiance, brightly and intensely twinkled like a real star illuminating all of a world bursting at the seams with Christmas joy. And then.

It happened.

There was a tremendous shattering noise. The curtains shook and light entered suddenly from outside.

One of the girls screamed. He heard and felt the vibrations of several tripping over in surprise. And, what happened next, was, really, something that happened in just a mere instant.

A white something, flew in from the darkness with terrible momentum and struck the top of the tree. There was an awful sound. There was screaming. All of the lights disappeared and everything went black. The enormous tree hadn't been anchored. After all, they were about to move it away. From its unstable weight, the tree leaned over simply, and then with frightening

momentum, came crashing to its side. The ornaments were a mess. The inserted parts came flying off, and several made ominous sounds.

He had no idea what happened. He didn't want to see what happened. A fragment of something flew at his cheeks and he closed his eyes on reflex.

No one, could say anything.

"Li...light! Turn the lights on! Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up!"

Only the panicked and quick voice of Kitamura disturbingly echoed throughout the large space. The lights came on from the opposite order of how they disappeared. The horrible disaster became exposed to all. Expressions disappeared from everyone's faces.

The tree that they had just finished assembling was completely ruined.

The ornaments were all scattered on the ground and the pulled-out power cords were sprawled around like

dead snakes. Pieces of styrofoam were littered about. Several of the parts forming the tree were severely broken.

And, what had been on top of the tree, Taiga's star, was

"Ah....no....no!....No way....."

Taiga ran to the star. She fell to her knees and quickly extended her hand out, but – "Stupid, you're going to get hurt!" – Ami pulled her elbow back. The star that had been made from crystal and had fallen onto the hard floor of the gym from a height of three meters was shattered to pieces. The sharp pieces glittered brutally and he thought that one wrong move would have easily ripped Taiga's skin.

What happened?

As if to force him to understand what happened, the fading sky stared at him from one of the curtains that covered a window. Not through the glass. The window was broken and pieces of the shattered glass were scattered at a place away from the tree. Thank God nobody was hit by the glass, Ryuuji thought, he thought, he thought, but, right now, he couldn't say anything.

At that time, the door of the gym burst open. Following suit, were the footsteps of several people and – "Sorry! Is anyone hurt!?" – the penetrating voice of a girl.

He turned. Ryuuji saw. The voice belonged to Minori, dressed in a dirty uniform. Following her were two girls with the same uniform, and,

"...."

Minori shut her mouth and froze.

What was left on the floor was a ball used in softball. This thing probably –

No, there's no mistake about it. It broke the window, knocked down and destroyed the tree, and broke Taiga's star.

I'm sorry, Minori's lips soon trembled. She repeated it, repeated it, and kept on repeating it. But her faint voice could barely be heard by anyone and time couldn't roll back. The foul ball foolishly hit by the chief of the girl's softball team couldn't be undone.

* * *

"Minorin, it's okay. It was an accident. These things happen. "

"No, ...I'm sorry....I'm sorry, I'm really sorry....."

The reason why all the members of the girls' softball team had assembled in the gym was to undo the damage that Minori caused to the tree. "The chief's blunder is our blunder! We're sorry!" After bowing in concert, they had gone to the corner of the gym with thoroughly disciplined movements, and were now sitting on their heels in small groups. All were silent and moved their hands, and if there were people that were busy solving the cubic puzzle, trying to glue the broken parts together, there were also those untangling the decorations and repairing the ornaments. The tree was being reassembled in the middle of the gym by the Preparatory Committee and the Student Council. Leaving this task to the softball team would actually take more time as the softball team hadn't seen the completed tree. Hence, this was the one

thing that Kitamura refused to have Minori and her team when the girls requested that they be allowed to fix everything.

Distancing herself from the girls in the softball team and distancing herself from the people rebuilding the tree, Minori sat below the stage. She looked at Taiga and Ryuuji who came over and called out to her, then looked over at the faces of her teammates,

"....Please let me do whatever I can do. Please. Taiga, don't worry about me. It's my fault.....Aaa.....I can't believe I did this.....aaah....."

- *What am I doing, seriously,* she said. She bit her lips so hard they became white.

Bitterly talking to herself, in her hands, she held the shards of Taiga's shattered star and instant glue. Minori was trying to somehow repair that intricately designed star. Taiga crouched next to Minori and desperately looked at the side of her stiffened face.

"....It's not your fault, Minorin. It absolutely isn't. It was just an unfortunate accident."

"No, it is my fault. It must have been because I zonked out. I hit that ball....it wasn't an accident, my aim was off. I screwed up. I couldn't concentrate, and, then I messed up. ....I'm sorry about your star. How could I break something so important to you... I can't put it completely back together but.....I'm sorry. Everyone, I'm sorry....I'm sorry."

Minori hung her head and scrubbed her face violently with the sleeve of her uniform. Her back trembled up and down, slowly but feebly from deep breathing.

Like she was at a complete loss, Taiga looked at the face of Ryuuji, standing next to her. However, Ryuuji didn't know what to do either.

The time to be leaving school was approaching, and the situation was, to put it frankly, bad. Everyone knew that this was an accident and wouldn't blame Minori, but that still didn't change the fact that this was bad. The teachers had given strict orders that all the students leave the school by the end of the afterschool period. If they didn't finish, they might not be able to hold the party. He was painfully aware of the feelings of Minori, who was frustrated on the inside but wouldn't be blamed by

anyone and ended up making even her teammates clean up her mess.

If only somebody exploded at her, screamed, cried, hit her; to Minori, that would have been far easier to stand. Having to be the one blaming yourself, has to be painful. The loop of rejection, hatred, and admonishment won't end until you forgive yourself. The guilt won't disappear either.

As she sat on her heels on the cold floor of the gym in her uniform, the edges of her eyes became red. She sniffed with her head drooped and her finger tips trembled not just because of the cold.

Taiga brought her hand to Minori, but, that hand wandered through the air for a short time. She gripped her fingers many times like she was hesitant, opened them, and abruptly stood up. She looked at Ryuuji's face and said,

"....Then, Ryuuji, why don't you help her? Okay?"

Saying that, she pushed Ryuuji's back, but

"No!"

Minori's shrill voice froze Ryuuji in his tracks. Taiga also froze. It resonated, virtually like a scream,

"No, stop, just stop doing that!"

And continued like that.

Minori didn't let anyone come near her and lowered her head, once again focusing on finishing the endless puzzle.

There was no smiling, no cheerful happy Christmas atmosphere, and only the heavy silence continued to pile up like falling snow flakes inside the chilly air.

Whether the preparations could be finished in time was dubious. He understood only one thing. The reasons why Minori won't be coming to the party, increased yet again. Ryuuji looked downward at Minori, but shut his slightly tired eyes. It was easy to endure the pain of being rejected. But, it was hard to just watch Minori be so nervous to have to shout that.

Closing her mouth, Taiga looked back and forth at Minori and Ryuuji. She bit the knuckle of her finger a little, then, once again looked at Ryuuji's face. Their eyes met, and Taiga nodded at Ryuuji slightly. Like she

wanted to say, *Take care of her*. Then, fluttering her hair and flipping around, she went towards the circle of people rebuilding the tree.

Ryuuji saw off her small back. Then, he continued to stand petrified without a plan next to Minori.

".....Takasu-kun, you go too. Okay? Let me work on this by myself."

After sniffing once, Minori made a forced smile with slanted eyebrows. But Ryuuji, didn't go.

He might not have had a plan, but he was determined to not go anywhere.

".....Just give it to me. I'm good at this stuff."

"Takasu-kun....."

"First off, you don't know what it looked like before. If you don't like it, ignore me."

He sat next to Minori, practically forcibly. He looked over the shards, found two large ones, and saying, "Ou, this is it," immediately went about gluing them together. Carefully and with discretion.

"......Takasu-kun, stop it. Let me take responsibility for this. Being.....being helped like this, I,"

"We don't have time. You do your own thing. I'm not helping you, I'm doing it on my own, for my own sake."

Minori's face contorted like she was going to cry. But she held it back and bit her lips. Like she became unable to say anything anymore, Minori dropped her eyes to the shards before her.

Then the two, remaining silent, devoted themselves to the task of putting together the crystal shards. There was no conversation. Even though he was sitting next to his crush so close he could feel her breathing, it was too cold and his chest didn't even throb at all. However, Ryuuji continued to stay by Minori. Even if she didn't want him there, he continued to be there.

During Taiga's suspension, he couldn't have a real conversation with her. He was being avoided by Minori, Taiga had told him back when they were studying at the family restaurant. Ryuuji and Minori, for a long time, continued to walk past each other. And now, this

unfortunate situation clearly split the space between them like a rift, and even if he was right next to her, his eyes and his voice didn't reach her.

Lately, he's only been feeling the distance between them.

Even so – No, because of that, Ryuuji wanted to stay by Minori. Because he was far from her, because he didn't understand, because he wasn't understood by her. That's why, he had to keep trying. If he was being avoided, he 'll chase after her. If they were getting the wrong signals from each other, he'll clear it up. If things get worse, he'll fix it. That's why, he forced himself, sitting there even if it was unnatural, and reached out his hand to her distant heart. This itself, was to Ryuuji, an act of "love." Even if he was the only one that was holding a hand out, it was a one-sided romance, so it's to be expected. Even if Minori only looked at him with a stiff face, even if her lips were colorless, even if she blamed herself and was close to tears, Ryuuji wanted to keep reaching out to her with his powerless hand. Praying only, that one day, it will reach her. The time he stopped extending his hand will be the time this love ends.

He picked up a shard. He found a different shard that matched it. Carefully smearing glue on it, he fit them together. Keeping them held in place for a while, he then nodded.

But because he might be bothering her, because he really didn't want to be hated by her, Ryuuji quietly held his breath as much as possible. Right now, it was best that Minori forgot that he was there.

But, just when he thought that,

"....Takasu-kun...."

"Ou."

Minori called Ryuuji's name quietly. Her face was facing the ground and still not looking at Ryuuji.

".....Takasu-kun, Takasu-kun....."

"I hear you."

"Takasu-kun...."

"I'm here."

- Minori repeatedly called out Ryuuji's name.

Each time, Ryuuji answered.

Without letting utterance go unheard, he answered each time. If Minori ever called him, he'll always answer. If Minori also put her hand out, he'll always grab it.

He softly glued another shard. Taiga's shattered star gradually was restored to its original form. It wasn't the same as before, but, it did shine without doubt.

He brought the crystal up and held it up to the light of the gym. He strained his eyes from the vivid light. Looking at the starlight, born for the purpose of shining at the center of a happy Christmas, the light which was the very symbol of happiness, Ryuuji smiled slightly. He put his arm out so that Minori could see the star and gently said,

"See. Look at it, it's beautiful right? Things can be fixed even after they break. So cheer up."

".....It won't be like it was before...."

"But it's definitely shining."

“.....I,”

Minori's voice wobbled like it was sinking in water. Pretending not to notice, he waited for the rest of what she had to say.

"....I don't know, if things can be fixed....."

"They can be!"

Ryuuji replied strongly and looked at the shining star. Its light shined happiness. Minori should have seen it. But if she still couldn't believe, he wanted to show it to her more clearly, more definitely. He wanted to hold it out, right in front of her.

Even if something does break and break, it can be put back together again and again – Just as his own feelings for Minori may be easily broken destroyed by little misunderstandings and delusions time and time again, they are still able to be mended and born anew by her smile and words.

Things may break, but they can be fixed.

And for each time something breaks, it can just be made all over again.

That's why there's no reason to cry if something breaks.

"Don't worry – They can be fixed, as many times as it takes."

The light he lifted up before them was a switch. He flipped the switch on and several star lights lit up in the depths of his once cowardly heart.

The Orion twinkling inside gave unlimited power to Ryuuji.

He clasped the baton he wanted to pass to Minori with that power. He held out his other hand so he could receive a baton from Minori and was already ready to take off. Then, Ryuuji's time will accelerate. His pulse will increase and his eyes will shine. The impending limit will lose its stopper as he ran towards the limit of his overflowing feelings.

He wasn't only going to wait with the hand he stretched out, he wanted to pass the baton, take the baton , and scream for her to run too. He wanted to show it to Minori. He wanted to show her the expanding world in

his heart, the limitless stars, the unbreakable, to the bottom of his heart. That's why he wanted her to run in the relay and not quit in the middle.

One year and half since he fell in love with Minori, Ryuuji finally wanted to shout out.

In the end, it took more than one hour to bring the tree back to something close to its original state. The seams where the shards were joined did stand out a little, and the repaired star looked like a mosaic decoration. But Taiga smiled, saying, "This is fine, it's cuter than before," and didn't glomp her, but hugged her, patting her back many times. Minori, for only one moment, buried her face in Taiga's hair, then separated herself from her. Yelling, "I'm truly sorry," with a loud voice, she bowed to the Preparatory Committee and the Student Council. She then turned herself to face the row of softball players and said, "I'm sorry for being such a bad chief.....!" one more time.

All the softball team members then bowed together and ran out of the gym.

Ryuuji, without hesitation, chased after the departing back of Minori.

He caught up to her in the chillingly quiet connecting corridor and patted her shoulder. To Minori, who looked back in surprise, he wanted to say it as brightly as possible.

“Come tomorrow! To the party! It’ll be fun for sure! .... I want to spend it with you!”

“.....”

Minori’s throat rang like she held her breath.

Ryuuji, didn’t stop.

“If you don’t have any plans, I mean....but I want you to come!”

He waited for Minori to say Takasu-kun one more time. He waited for those words to come out from her lips with cracked and weak whispering.

But.

“.....No. I can’t go.”

Minori didn't call out his name. She shook her head very clearly to the side, standing. Her face, beneath the darkly flickering fluorescent lights, even looked pale. .

"I caused too much trouble. I can't go."

"But I'll wait for you!"

".....Don't wait. I won't go."

"I'll wait!"

With tenacity close to a stalker, Ryuuji yelled at Minori 's back, not caring about the other softball members. He didn't care if what he was doing was unsightly, if it was shameful, if his face became a red-faced demon king. The love that had begun running wouldn't stop. The switch that was turned on once couldn't be turned off again.

* * *

December 24, 4 PM.

After the ending ceremony ended before lunch and each of them satisfied their hunger with the boxed lunches they had brought with them, all of them worked like the devil to prepare for the party, leading to the present state of matters. All the members of the Student Council and the Preparatory Committee were assembled in the gym. Everyone stood and watched as the teacher in charge of the fire safety checked off items in detail with a manual in one hand. If there was something out of order here, then... – thought Ryuuji, who probably wasn't the only one that was a little nervous and thinking the same thing.

"....Yes, this is okay, ...Circled. No problem. "

To the voice they'd been waiting for, there were relieved outbursts of, "Yay!" "We're finished!"

"Well then, gentlemen. Be sure that no problems occur , okay? In the off-chance that there are any students violating the rules on alcohol, smoking, and such, that person will be immediately expelled. Do you understand

? Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts, I am expecting you in particular to fulfill your responsibilities as manager and supervisor."

"Yes, sir!"

The person Kitamura answered with a salute was our Bachelorette (30), Koigakubo Yuri (Currently searching for real estate). She was dressed in a striking style, more mannish than usual, wearing a classy, shiny grey pantsuit, white gold bitter accessory, and hair arranged in an up-style hairdo. Dropping their guard, the first year girls began to kid around with the Bachelorette (30).

"Oh yeah, Yuri-chan-sensei, wow you're all stylish today!"

"Could it be, a date!?"

Kya! An Eve date with a boyfriend! ....the girls rumbled in excitement, but the team of older students ignored them and were silent. After getting to know Koigakubo Yuri for this long, they knew to their bones that this thirty-year old wasn't the romance champion that was going to get a date that easily on Christmas Eve. In the first place, the fact that she lost her most promising partner by the retrograding of Mercury still lingered

freshly in everyone's memories. And, the answer was just what the older team had expected,

"This is not a date. Today, after this, I will be going to the "Real Estate Purchasing Class for Single Women." .... Because, I'm going to buy an apartment.....The fee to attend is 1500 yen...."

That's reasonable – Ryuuji was very pleased with this answer and tried to burn the heroic image of dark-brown-make-up armored Bachelorette (30) in his eyes, but nope, he shifted his eyes away. He got a little too excited.

"Eh.....!? Re-real estate.....?"

"....On, Eve.....? Why?"

Apparently, to the 15 and 16-year old girls, this was quite unbelievable. They must have been thinking just where the fun was in a flower lining herself up with other people on Eve to go to a class on real estate. And not just that, even having to pay an entry fee. It looks like it went beyond the scope of their understanding.

"You see, on Eve, you see, a woman that looks like she has a date, isn't prepared yet. The dream property pops

up out of nowhere, but oh, there's nothing to intercept it with! You see. This itinerary, in other words, is our first barrier. It's the first test for weighing the qualifications of single women trying to obtain real estate. Do you understand?"

"Uh....."

"Um....."

"...Well then, since it feels like the interest rates have hit rock bottom as well, I'll be leaving. Ah, the other teachers will be in the staff room for the whole time, so be sure to greet them before and after the party."

And so, somehow, the nearly shriveled spirit of the students revived again, and all gave a hearty, "Okaay!" in response. Maybe the Bachelorette (30) as well had recovered the moisture of her heart from the cheer of her students as the corners of her desperate and raised eyes relaxed slightly. As she left, she whispered to Ryuuji with a smile on her face as she passed him.

"I'm happy the tree turned out so beautiful. Your results went up too, and I'm real happy~. I'm confident that the efforts of you guys will be rewarded."

Ryuuji also grinned back at his Single Homeroom teacher.

"Thank you! I'm confident that you'll find a good apartment!"

"Ah....mmm....thank you...."

We will be rewarded!

Ryuuji with secret, but powerful determination, looked up at the tree praised by the Bachelorette (30) as well. It was a little wobbly, but the tree standing right at the center of the gym was enormous, magnificent, and beautiful. It was very, very, gorgeous. The seams of the glued parts were carefully rasped, and nobody should be able to tell that it had fallen apart just by looking at it. And at the top, was Taiga's star. It was perfect.

The tree wasn't the only thing that was perfect. White and blue spotlights lit the floor from above and their positions were adjusted like they were intersecting each other in the sky. If the lighting in the gym is turned off and only those lights illuminated the hall, it'll become dramatic, no doubt. The stool tests had paid off, and booths of fruit punch, sandwich, fruit, cracker, and desert were lined up grandly against the wall. While the people

actually serving the food in rotations were, of course, the Preparatory Committee members, the provider was a renowned catering company. Through Ami's connections , in exchange for sampling impressions from the partygoers on the food, they were able to rent the service complete with the equipment, free of charge.

At the center of the gathered, Kitamura shouted, " Now then!"

"There's been a lot of trouble, but, all of the preparations are set! Guys, good work! Your enormous cooperation in the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts' project is deeply appreciated! There's still work to be done, but please, all of you, have fun! .....And Ami, thanks for the tree and the food."

Surrounded by a chorus of roaring applause, Ami said, "Oh no, it's not a big deal at aaall~!" widening her eyes and acting excited.

"There she goes again, Stupichi is really.....Ryuuji?"

"....."

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Eh? Wha, what?"

In reaction to the voice of Taiga, right beside him, Ryuuji blinked his eyes. He must have looked like he was in bad enough shape to have to be asked if he was okay. Yeah, for these few hours, he's had to put up with non-stop work, but,

"Your eyes, are kind of looking really vacant....or I can't tell where they're looking at? You're acting scary. What happened? Well, I knew that you're worried about Minori from what happened yesterday, but if you don't get motivated,"

"No. Other way around. Right now, I am really, really on fire. Look, the hall's perfect. The preparations are all in order. And if only Kushieda comes, then everything is. ..! .....But, turns out that's the biggest hurdle, huh. I tried inviting her and was being really persistent about it, but she only said 'sorry.'"

Taiga crossed her arms.

"Yes, things might have been just a little easier if only that accident hadn't happened yesterday.....no, but, if you're that fired up then.....You'll be fine. Don't you worry. Keep it up. Leave everything to me, Angel Taiga."

"…..What exactly are you going to do?"

Except, his motivation is just going around in circles – Ryuuji actually sort of realized this, but looking up at that same Ryuuji, Taiga, however, gave him a confident V-sign.

"I said don't worry. It'll be fine. I've got a plan."

The whispered exchange was for a moment, drowned out by the bustle that rose up from around them. Kitamura temporarily disbanded the group for the period until the opening of the hall. People wanting to change would go home or change in the classrooms with the clothes they brought with them, people wanting a break would head down to the classrooms or a store somewhere with friends; and so the students started walking towards each and began talking

The hall was scheduled to be opened at 5 PM. People will start entering at that time, Kitamura will make his opening presentation at 5:30, and from there, the party will officially begin! – was the plan. People could come late as they please, they could leave as they please, they could have fun as they please, and the closing ceremony was at 7:30. All must leave at 8:00, and the Preparatory

Committee and the Student Council will assemble again at 8 AM in the following morning. Cleanup will be thoroughly and responsibly performed.

And so, there was only one hour left until the hall opened. So then, what to do, thought a pausing Ryuuji, but he was lightly poked at the elbow. The poker was Kitamura.

"What are you and Aisaka going to do now? The Student Council will be preparing the reception desk, but , ah, maybe you can help out!? That'll be a real help!"

"Really? I don't mind."

Then, Ami put her chin over on Kitamura's shoulder and jutted her face out.

"Just say no, you sucker. Yuusaku, you're such a slave driver. Guys like that don't succeed, don't you know~?"

"Shaddup. What are you going to do Ami? How about you help too?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm going to go home, and c-h-a-n-g-e ♥ See you at the opening~!"

Taiga also tugged on Ryuuji's sleeve like she was trying to follow Ami's departing back.

"I'm sorry Kitamura-kun. I'm also going to go back once. Let's go, Ryuuji."

"Eh? Go home and do what? I'm fine with staying,"

"I said we're going home! Walk! Hurry! Okay, I'll see you later!"

Thus, Ryuuji was sent homeward bound, by force practically, pulled by Taiga. What was the point in going back home? Even if he asked, Taiga would ignore the question and not answer him. So it's okay if Santa sees you ignoring people huh?

Once they arrived at the entrance of Taiga's apartment,

"Once you get inside your own house, open the window to your room."

".....Why?"

"Just do it. Do what I say."

Taiga nonsensically commanded him, putting one hand to her hip and pointing one hand at the tip of Ryuuji's nose. While thinking what was this supposed to be about,

"I'm home."

"Ah Welcome home! How were the results?"

He tossed his grade card at Yasuko, curled up in the kotatsu without a care in the world. While being exposed to a scream of "Kya~" which could be good or bad for whatever he knew, Ryuuji did as he was told, went up to the bed, and opened the south window dutifully. Across from the window was Taiga's familiar apartment, and just about when he faced himself towards Taiga's bedroom,

".....Here!"

"Ou!?"

The window slid open and immediately after, Taiga tossed at Ryuuji a box so big that her arms could barely

go around it. He promptly put both his hands out and caught it. It wasn't as heavy as it looked, but even still, he was pretty surprised.

"Wha, what the hell! Geez, that's dangerous, don't be so lazy....."

"Be sure to open it on the double. You'll understand once you see it. I'll come over in 30 minutes."

Then the window to Taiga's room was shut tight. The curtains were courteously closed as well, and Ryuuji was left alone. No, he wasn't alone.

"What's wrong, De Yansu ka? What's tha~t?"

"....Taiga, threw it at me....told me to open it....."

Facing Yasuko, Ryuuji sat on the floor and was going to open the mystery box Taiga had thrown over. The hands of mother and son both grasped the lid and pulled simultaneously. Then,

"O....Ou....."

Their jaws fell at the same angle. The timing that they widened their eyes and fell silent was also simultaneous.

It's only at these sorts of times that the Takasu genes of Yasuko and Ryuuji became laid bare and that the two of them looked identical to each other.

The door made the sound of being opened, and he could hear the sound of high heels clacking from the front door. In continuation, there was the sound of brisk footsteps entering the living room as if they were in their own house,

"Huh? Ryuuji? Yacchan? Where are you?"

"Over here! The bathroom!"

When he answered, she returned to the hall from the living room and looked through the already opened door . Then, the two of them pointed at each other.

"Ah!"

"Ou!"

They let out startled voices. Ryuuji had been looking at the mirror. Crouching by his feet and wrapping the cord of a dryer, Yasuko also noticed her presence, raised her face, and looked at Taiga.

"Wo~w "

She squealed and smiled. "Fantastic, fantastic~, you look so cute, Taiga-cha~n!" She softly straightened the fur around her neck. Ryuuji lost track of what he should have said and his eyes glimmered.

Taiga, in 30 minutes, transformed from a petite high school girl into a woman going to a party. Her bangs were clipped to one side and her long wavy hair was swept up to the top of her head. The whiteness of her forehead was striking, and her ruby red lips and dazzling eyes, the depths intensified by jet black mascara , looked stunning. The womanliness of Taiga's normally delicate, French-doll-like face was stressed by the light makeup and her distinct and exquisite features stood out powerfully, turning her face into a gorgeous and beautiful one.

Sheer stockings complimented the petite, knee-length, simple, silk onyx dress fitting her beautiful figure. Her

sorrowful chest needn't bother Ryuuji, as the drape of the folded cloth covered it. Not only that, she wore long, glossy-black gloves and a youthful, short-sleeved, 7/8 fox coat. Holding a clutch bag having a swaying black-beaded fringe, and wearing a pearl choker that further brought out the slenderness of her neck, Taiga was indeed, perfect. She was beautiful and graceful from any angle and her chic black was fashionable. She was so beautiful it felt like it was a shame this was only for a party. A light smile slowly stretched across the lips of that beauty.

"....That's great. The size is perfect."

Ryuuji also was handsomely dressed in an outfit that was so fine, in one way, it felt like it was a shame this was for a party, truth be told.

Inside the box that Taiga threw over was a black suit, and following Yasuko's advice, he made the knot on his necktie somewhat loose, buttoned only the middle of the three buttons of his jacket, pushed the bangs on his head up, held them down with hair wax then, oh my! Ryuuji became Prince Charming – of the underworld. Yakuza Second in Command, the Successor, names like that suited him perfectly.

But the only thing that was off was Ryuuji's mug. The fact was the slender suit itself was well-tailored and the color was classy and black but didn't give off the air of mourning attire.

"Is this, is this....is this really okay!? I, I, is it okay that I borrow this! I can't s-s-s-, stop stammering....."

It looked expensive enough to make him want to lick his dried lips and stammer. Taiga shrugged her fur-covered shoulders like it didn't matter much and said to him straight.

"I'm not lending it. I'm giving it to you."

"You're going to give it to me!? R.Aisaka's embroidered on the lining, you know!?"

"Back when I was leaving home, I told the movers to bring everything inside the closet, and they ended up bringing this with them. Don't worry. He got it as a gift from someone, but it was too baggy for him. It looked like it was too much of a hassle for him to fix it, so he left it hanging there. If it bothers you, take the name off. Destroy the evidence."

"No way in hell am I going to wear that bastard's hand-me-down."

"It's Gucchi."

"Guh....."

"If you won't wear it, I'll have to get rid of it."

"M, M, M, MOTTAINAI! Argh, the embroidery scissors! I'm destroying the evidence!"

While Yasuko joined up and was nodding with him, he chopped the thread. He smoothly pulled the thread out, and thus, Ryuuji officially got his Yakuza Second in Command suit. Taiga did give it to me and disposing it was MOTTAINAI.....and while telling himself that, Ryuuji got carried away and looked at the mirror one more time. In it, was a charming, handsome, young man! ....which wasn't going to be the case unfortunately, but well in its own way, his face had power to it, and it wasn' t as if it didn't not didn't look good on him. Er, it did. Or so he had been thinking. He didn't know what a third party would think.

Looking at that Ryuuji through the mirror, Taiga formed a smile on her cherry lips.

"With this done, everything's all set. But, the most important thing – you understand right? You're going to wear this tonight, and you'll do that thing you're supposed to do. .... I absolutely won't get in the way. Anyway, just believe in me and relax. And, this will be the only day I can say this, but Takasu Ryuuji, today, you are looking a lot more marginally better than usual or..... .you look impressive. That's why, keep your back straight and hold your chin up with pride."

You're looking pretty fine yourself tonight.

....But he wasn't able to say that. His lips were trembling and he suddenly couldn't bring himself to look at Taiga straight. Since he was told that, he wanted to hide his face. *You're making me blush you idiot,* he quietly groaned in the depths of his throat. Knowing that Ryuuji was blushing, Taiga let out a chuckle deep in her throat.

He knows what he has to do.

So that everyone will be rewarded, so that everyone will be able to enter tomorrow with smiles, he'll spend

this Eve happily. He'll complete the relay of happiness without missing one person. He hasn't given up on Minori. He'll also email her to get her to come. He'll call her too. If Taiga's got a plan, he'll try believing in the blessings of Angel Taiga. Heck, there might be the blessings of the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts too.

He clenched his fists in front of the shabby washbasin and reinvigorated himself with an, ".....Okay!" He didn't know if Taiga was thinking of Kitamura's face or if she was thinking of her Santa dream, but she bolstered the light in her eyes.

"Oh~yeah Ehehe~, Yacchan'll cast a grown-up spell on you two~!"

Yasuko beamed at them then left the narrow bathroom while humming. She went to her room, and when she came back, she was holding in her hands a small, purple, bottle and a worn-out leather case. Yasuko first turned to Taiga,

"Excuse me~!"

"Wah!"

After spraying liquid from the bottle onto her own fingertips and shaking her hand in the air several times, her hand then dived gently into the chest portion of Taiga's dress. Before a shocked and speechless Ryuuji, his mother's hand went back and forth two times through Taiga's barren, continental shelf-like, cleavage. A little while later, a pleasant smell with a mysterious warmth reached his nose.

"Hehe, that was, perfume~ It's a little on the fragrant side, more than Toilette sprays, but if you put a lit~tle on your tummy, your chest, your warm places, you won't fail~

"Tha....thank you. ....Wah, it, smells really nice....real perfume, it's like I really became an adult!"

And, twitching her nose to the scent more like an animal than an adult, Taiga smiled up at Yasuko. Yasuko , also, happily replied,

"It'll blend with Taiga-chan's smell, and by the time the party stats, I'm sure the fragrance will come on out just a little~! Next, I'll give this to Ryuu-chan! Tada!"

Inside the case she opened, was an imposing men's watch made in Japan. While it wasn't flashy, it was a

dignified watch, with no rust nor smears, and even the seconds hand moved just fine and matched the time perfectly. For something this old, it's sure been taken care of very – *ah*. Ryuuji realized what it could possibly be.

"Wait.....is this, Dad's?"

"Wrongo "

Breaking her son's romantic fantasy simply, Yasuko laughed jollily.

"Once upon a time, I ran off with as many expensive things as I could carry when I was running away from home. Kimonos~, sash clips with jewels~, rings~, anything glittery that I could lay my hands on~. I brought this with me too, but it didn't look like I could get much from it when I showed it to a pawnbroker, and so~, while I was being stingy on selling it, it managed to last till today~~"

".....A-and the other stuff....."

"They've a~~~ll been changed to money before Ryuu-chan turned three "

.... The children automatically lost the ability to speak upon hearing the far too harsh life story of the mother. " But really~, it would have been nice if we had Papa's Rolex ~, it would have looked good on you, with that diamond-studded combo~," narrated Yasuko as Ryuuji fitted the watch on his wrist. The size was perfect and the stainless steel was surprisingly cold. Enough to make his heart spring.

"So, this, belongs to.....more like....was stolen from Gramps.....!"

"Cor~rect! W~ow! It looks great, it look great, it looks great on you Ryuu-chan~! Ah, , I'm glad I didn't sell it for peanuts~! I was really wondering what I should have done on that day~"

He didn't know what day that would be, but Ryuuji kept his mouth shut for a little. His zest also calmed down, and once he came to and looked at himself, he saw that what he was currently wearing was a suit that Taiga snatched off from that detestable father and a watch that Yasuko stole from his real grandfather to survive on when she left home.

It sort of felt like his entire body was clad with things of shady origin – if "someone" was really looking, this might have been his punishment. The muscles in his back trembled unconsciously. He remembered something he wanted to forget. *Daddy doesn't get rewarded*, the series of lines that Ami oh so high and mightily said. His suit and his watch were filled with the thoughtlessness, the regret, the resent, and all sorts of curses left behind from fathers that abandoned their daughters.

Why.

No, just stop. I shouldn't be thinking about resent and curses on Christmas.

December 24th, just a little before 5 PM. Yasuko had called over one of her cab-driving regulars to the front of the Takasu residence so that Taiga wouldn't have to walk to school with her high heels.

They luxuriously entered the cab and told the driver their destination. "Ah, a date!?" teased the familiar old man, but both replied, "No, it isn't!" Tucked firmly inside the back pocket of the suit of Ryuuji, whom was sinking on the cushion, was the small present he wanted to give to Minori.

Then, night fell in the town.

The illuminations of Christmas Eve twinkled on, as if they were a flood of lights.

His chest throbbed.

Hope and worry surged over him one after another.

Ryuuji fiddled restlessly with his necktie's knot. Grabbing his sleeve to make him stop, Taiga quietly said to him, "I told you, you'll be fine," with a voice that included a smile.

The taxi that the Yakuza Second in Command in the Gucchi suit and the elegant woman – still small in spite of the 9 centimeter heels – had entered was like a magic carriage. Carrying a boy and girl different from their usual selves going to a brilliant world different from its usual self, the taxi drove off at 40 km/h in the direction of the radiant Christmas Eve town.

Chapter 5

"We even came here early but it's sooo crowded! How many people are here!? Ah, it's Takasu!"

"Hey, Taka-chan! Over here!"

5:15 PM

The gym, with a twinkling tree set in its center, its curtains closed, and lights and illuminations adorned throughout, was stuffed with noisy students. The excitement from the Christmas party, which was from something they didn't get to see everyday, was probably at its peak, and there were all sorts of people getting into the spirit of things. There were those wearing the shiny party hats handed out at the reception desks, those wearing Groucho glasses, and one wearing a suit as well as...

"Ah, watch it! Don't you dare spill that! You're going to get dust stuck on the floor with that!"

...A bandana and apron, acting like the old lady at the cafeteria. *Eek*....was the reaction of the guy that was being yelled at, shrugging his shoulders. But he deserved it. Even with the hall this packed, he was unsteadily

holding a full cup of fruit punch in one hand, and was about to spill the sweet carbonated juice on the floor.

Noto and Haruta pushed their way through the crowd of people as if they were swimming through a wave with a forward crawl, and approached the old lady in the suit and the bandana. Noticing them, the old lady, Ryuuji, said, "Ou!" and put on his special Yaksha face. Er, no, he smiled.

"Hey, Taka-chan. I can't believe you're wearing an apron when you've got something on that sweet! And say, when did you get a suit that stylish!? Oh man~, lucky you~! I'm stuck with this thing I just bought at the station building!"

And when Haruta pinched, wriggling the edge of his cutsew,

"Haruta's case is still okay. It's new too. Me, I've got this, this. I've been wearing it for two years."

Noto tugged on his worn-out parka, on which the name of a minor band was written in large letters. Their eyes watered up sadly, as if to say, *If everybody's going to be dressed up, tell us~*. This, by the way, was not even as adorable as cat poop.

From behind these two pitiful men, cold voices rattled.

"Hey! That's the line for the fruit punch, you know!"

"Don't cut in line!"

It was a little hard to tell with that crowd, but it seems that Noto and Haruta had accidentally cut to the head of the line.

Uh oh, thought Ryuuji, who then waved his ladle with a piercing look in his eyes. Like magic, the trajectory of the ladle banished Noto and Haruta from the dimension of the people in the line. Basically, he scooted them in a little. As far as ladling went, Ryuuji basically had no equals.

Haruta held down his long head and bowed to the people in the line, saying "So sorryy," whereas Noto, whose glasses were fogging up from being close to so many people, spotted a team of girls in Chinese dresses and firmly rubbed the lens with his fingers.

Having arrived to the party on a magic chariot, the prince of the underworld was currently settling in as the

person in charge of the wall-side fruit punch booth, radiating an alien presence.

But still, it wasn't as if Ryuuji wanted to take up this dull job. When he and Taiga had gotten out of the car together, all of the amazed eyes of present students were on them. It wasn't his imagination, it really wasn't. There were people saying how stylish, how beautiful, how cute, and even somewhat maniacal ones like, "Didn't expect any less of the Tiger. Those high-heels are lethal weapons ...." But for the most part, he already had been excessively exposed to something as ticklish as jealous eyes.

As they caught the attention of the surrounding mob, they slowly walked step by step with each other to the center of the hall where the tree was. Then, Ryuuji's eyes, by chance, looked toward the walls. That was when things went wrong. His eyes became glued to it. Syrup dripped heavily from the ladle, and cracker crumbs littered the tablecloths though it wasn't long after the opening of the hall. The people who should have been serving the food were chit-chatting, "Ah, it's pretty cold" "Still, there's sure a lot of people here."

At that moment, one of Ryuuji's cheeks twitched. His right hand scratched the area that would have been

where his uniform pocket was in vain, but he then remembered that he was wearing a suit now. He didn't have the Takasu stick either. He had tissues and a handkerchief, but no wet tissues. He didn't have his baking soda water pack set. He didn't have his emergency stain remover, nor did he have his magic cloth. He didn't have his favorite, all-purpose, acrylic sponge. He didn't have his citric acid spray. He didn't even have his antibacterial gel, air freshener, or natural soap..... He was completely exposed. He might as well been stark naked.

Ryuuji, feeling like a soldier stripped of his arguments, recklessly ran forward. "Just shoot dammit! Er, no... Out of the way~! Please, please let me do it~~~! I'll keep this place from being a mess~~~~!"..... Ryuuji was exposed to enemy fire, completely naked, and started showing the perverted habit he normally hid. A fed-up Taiga had disappeared somewhere, and once he came to,

"But Takasu, are you going to do that the whole time? I kind of feel sorry for you."

".....No, not the whole time....I...think...."

He could only twist his head in response to Noto, who once again approached him, this time lining up properly from the end of the line to reach him. While pouring the foaming fruit punch into Noto's cup, he began to question anew what the devil he was doing, and looked around at his surroundings.

There was still a little time left before 5:30, when the party was to officially begin. However, there were already many students inside the gym, and it was crowded beyond what he had imagined. He got the feeling that there weren't that many third-years here. They had entrance examinations to study for naturally. But still, there were guys still in their uniforms, guys showing off their fashion sense, a group using the occasion to go for the complete gag route by dressing up in drag, and costumed mascots ranging from animals to copyrighted characters appearing and disappearing here and there. There were also couples clinging to each other, being teased by cries of "XXXmas Eve, XXXmas Eve!" from the drag group.

"Ou!? What is that!?"

"That's the 'Ami-chan faction' that's been rumored to be getting out of control lately. They're supposed to be extreme...."

More than a dozen men were wearing long, fluorescent yellow Happi coats with the sloppy and dangerous-looking characters for "Ami-sama Forever" and "Ami-sama Love" written on the back, and wore bandanas tightly around their foreheads. They were sitting in a line at the entrance with one knee up and with serious faces, and... "Wow~, the party's in hi..... Gyah!" ...needlessly frightening a group of girls who had finished their business at the reception table, and did it without changing their expressions to boot. Haruta too was slurping up his fruit punch,

"They're waiting for Ami-chan to come~. They look dangerous don't they~? Fuhihi!"

He laughed at them from a distance. However, the thing that was boldly dangling from his chest, fitted with an abnormally long telephoto lens, was a dangerous-looking camera.

".....So, Haruta. Just what are you going to take a picture of....?"

Overlooking this was difficult as one of the committee members running the party. But the idiot happily said, " Ah, you noticed~!?" and proudly flashed a V-sign.

"Ami-chan, you know~! Okay~! She'll be like jiggle, jiggle, tu~nak, tunakking with another unbelievable outfit~! She should when she shows up~! So I borrowed this~! Ahahahahahahahaha!"

From Haruta's big, laughing mouth, a strand of fruit punch came tu~nakking out of his mouth like saliva. Not even pretending to care, the idiot suddenly pulled in his face and said with determination,

"I, want to just remember Ami-chan's LENGS, I want to leave behind a record....."

...."You mean legs", Noto corrected, the tone of his voice having a sad inflection. Ryuuji forgot the anger inside him and was going to gently wipe the mouth of his brainless friend. However, "Eh, what!? Don't act like a mom! That's gross!" ....His hand was knocked away unexpectedly roughly, and Ryuuji was hurt by this so much that even he was surprised. Noto comforted him, patting his back, but his eyes weren't looking at a watery-eyed Ryuuji, but the hubbub around.

"But, so where is Ami-chan? The party's almost about to start you know? I did see Kihara and Nanako though."

"A~o! That Kihara, she was like showing off her legs with her short pants~! She is soooo baiting us~! Sexy~! On the other hand, Nanako-sama's wearing a pure white Cinderella dress~! She's also baiting us~! Sexy~!"

The words of the idiot passed through Ryuuji's ears from right to left in an instant. Now that he mentioned it, he hadn't seen Ami yet. It'd be like that attention whore to be spending time on getting lavishly dressed up. Maybe she was going be dressed in something as ridiculous as that thing she wore back when she was hosting the Cultural Festival beauty pageant. Or maybe, she was going to arrive here late on purpose, grab all the attention, then, "Ha, ha! Grovel behind Ami-chan as she walks, smell and lick the scent of her footsteps, shed tears of joy at miracle of her absolute beauty, and get out of the way you foolish commoners, yeehaw!" This was likely, which was why he cringed.

But...

The truth was, the person he'd been looking for since earlier wasn't Ami.

Even while he was mixing the fruit punch, wiping the table, and talking to Noto and Haruta, the person he had been waiting for and hadn't forgot about for even a moment was none other than Kushieda Minori.

Ryuuji surveyed the clamorous gym filled with students. He gently held down the small lump in his back pocket.

There wasn't a reply yet to the email he had just sent. He had tried calling her cell phone once, but it went to voicemail, and he hadn't heard a word from her since then. Before he knew it, he had lost sight of Taiga too, the one who had told him while puffing out her flat chest, " You'll be fine, just leave it to me."

She still didn't come.

No, more like, just as he'd thought. No matter how many times he invited her today, she was already set on not coming. And ultimately, she still hadn't changed her mind, so maybe, she really might not show up.... *No, don't think like that.* Ryuuji shook his head violently. He forcefully discarded the discouraging thoughts from his brain. There was something he wanted to show to Minori right? There was something he wanted to give her right?

What is not believing in himself going to accomplish? And, the party still hasn't even begun yet. Things are just starting. Clenching the ladle, Ryuuji lifted his face up, but just at that moment,

"Eh~, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you, thank you, thank you very much for attending this Christmas party today!"

Kitamura's mic-amplified voice reverberated throughout the hall. Ryuuji, Noto, Haruta, and everyone else in the hall looked toward the stage in unison – and gagged. Their jaws could only drop once they saw the brave figure of the Student President, the organizer of tonight's party.

"Please take out the party poppers that were distributed at the reception table! In celebration of Christmas Eve, I would like to countdown to the beginning of the party!"

On the stage, Kitamura, smiling in a pleasant mood, was dashingly dressed as a nudist Santa. Other than the fake beard, the usual red hat, black boots, red pants, and suspenders barely covering his nipples, he wasn't wearing anything. He was stark naked.

Why? For what purpose? The people in the hall were unable to ask him these questions and, uninhibited, Kitamura continued to lead the party. "*His unwanted but exposed skin raised goosebumps and laid bare his surprisingly muscular chest. If only that was Ami-chan*"....was what was being nonsensically mumbled by Haruta, who then helplessly took a picture, thus capturing the nude Santa.

"Are you ready!? Let's celebrate this year's Christmas Eve! 3, 2,"

Ryuuji frantically grabbed the party popper he had left beside him. Everyone in the hall raised the party poppers that were distributed at the reception desk, one per person. Then, Kitamura,

"1, ...Merry.....
Christmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaas!!"

Yelled, and at the same time.

"It's still Christmas Eve!", shouted several people, but that was overwhelmed by the powerful bursting sounds of *Pop! Pop!* High voices shrilled in delight. Streamers burst out at once from the simultaneous popping of over a hundred party poppers and brilliantly fluttered in the rays from the lights. The air in the hall was brightly cast

in tempestuous colorfulness in an instant. There was a second, delayed blast from somewhere as someone fired his. Laughter could be heard from where that happened.

As the smell of explosive powder floated in the air, all of the lights that had been left on by the entrance were shut off, and only the top spotlights were left lighting the hall. The whistling of someone trailed, laughter and cheering roared throughout, and Ryuuji was close to getting a screw turned loose.

"Yay! Merry Christmas! Here's to next year!"

"Merikuri~~~~~! Uhyo~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!"

Noto and Haruta and high-fived each other, and Ryuuji, adding an, "Ou! Merry Christmas.....Eve!" drank down the awfully sweet fruit punch he had poured for himself.

The carbonic acid fizzled in his throat. The strong sweetness wrapped around his tongue. However, the heat still wasn't enough to make his heart dance. There wasn't enough power. She still didn't come. If Minori didn't show up, he couldn't see the goal mark for the love he was dashing toward.

The beating of his jumping heart, the stiffening of his shaking back, everything in his body, everything, was waiting for her to appear. Ryuuji was waiting for Minori's smile. *Please be here, please smile at me*, he prayed with all his might. He held out his imaginary hand, his imaginary baton, as if asking her to grab it.

Then, it happened.

The curtains of the stage that the very unsightly Kitamura had departed from rose, and cheering grew even more, bursting in colors of surprise and excitement. Ryuuji's eyes flashed open manically. Was it because he spotted the man that killed his old man...? No. ...What he was firmly clutching wasn't a gun. It was a ladle.

There sure isn't any background music playing was what he had been thinking. He knew, of course, that they were going to fire the party poppers to celebrate the opening (Ryuuji had gotten them after all), so he had figured that playing music afterward would build up the opening mood.

But he had been fooled. He had been completely fooled.

The first year Preparatory Committee member that was handing out sandwiches next to him also had his mouth hanging open in surprise. He didn't know either. To think it'd be a surprise to the Preparatory Committee members too..... It looked like the only ones that knew were the Student Council and them.

On the stage, a secret, one night only, special production was put on. The bones in his body tingled, resonating to the raw sound of unfamiliar drums. The vibrations from the floor raced across his quivering body. The blood in his whole body trembled.

Drums, guitar, bass, and a keyboard. If he remembered right, this should've been the band from the pop music club. He remembered hearing that they were pretty good from the people who saw their live performance at the Cultural Festival. What they were playing was a pop arrangement of an all-too-famous Christmas number one single that everyone should've known. And the one leading the band, singing into the mic with English lyrics was,

"Ta.....Taiga.... That's Taiga!"

Ryuuji was about to faint.

It was Taiga, wearing a black strapless dress. Ami was there too, wearing the same kind of knee-length black dress and had the same kind of hairdo as Taiga. Besides them, there was a second year from the Student Council and another girl, who probably was the vocalist of the pop music club.

The four fashionably dressed girls, all with stylish side-swept hair, deep red lipstick, elbow-length gloves, and black strapless dress, joined their voices to the melody. The girls stepped to the right, and then to the left in front of the mic stands. They raised their arms up, tilted their heads a little, then slowly lowered their hands from the elbows. The group's choreography was sharp, and their singing voices were light and harmonious.

Lights crossed, shining over the four, and from the hall , a coordinated clapping arose. Other voices began sing along with the major parts of song here and there. There were smiles, talking, a Christmas song, and bright lining shining on everything.

"....Wow. Tiger is...singing, and dancing...."

Haruta forgot to release the shutter and danced to the rhythm, his mouth still half open. A clapping and whistling Noto quietly replied.

"It's the power of love, it's love. Just what does she see in that exhibitionist.....right?"

But to those eyes that had quickly glanced at him, Ryuuji couldn't respond. He looked at Taiga on the stage, then Ami, and then thought, *Geez*.

Geez, seriously.

He had no idea that they'd been working on this. When everyone had been so busy with studying for exams and party preparations, just where did they find the time to rehearse for this, this fine Christmas band?

The songstresses in black, however, trailed off their singing like they were intent on keeping their performance to the background, and stepped up their choreography. Putting both hands to their hips and shaking their heads, they danced with light steps. The people gathering around the tree also followed suit, stepping to the music. Ami, the attention whore, was apparently content on staying as only part of a set

tonight. She didn't grandstand, and standing right next to her natural enemy, Taiga, she matched her movements to everyone, and rhythmically shook her ivory shoulders.

The sparkling gold and silver confetti soon began to scatter throughout the hall. Using the air from the ventilation ducts, the guys from the Student Council sprinkled handfuls of confetti from the second floor corridors. The handmade confetti fluttered up, riding on the movement of the air. Ryuuji could also hear the simultaneous voices of girls squealing, "Wow! It's like snow!"

Amidst the shimmering, falling snow, the tree silently beamed light as the symbol of the party. It was enormous , as if it were shining over the entire crowd of smiles. He couldn't see any signs of it being damaged from his wall-side booth. The blinking mini-lights, the bell vine he made with Ami, the silver-blue ornaments, the glossy golden balls, all glittered brilliantly under the crossing spotlights

The same was true for Taiga's star, shining at the top of the tree. Twinkling lights radiated from it beautifully. He could see it brightly shining.

This is so wonderful.

This was, awesome.

Ryuuji looked up at the stage, still paralyzed. He looked at the beautiful Christmas decorations, dazzling illuminations, the large tree, at the live performance, at a singing Taiga. At a dancing Ami. At a nude Kitamura. At his partying friends. And at the many, many, smiling faces. At this hot and crazy, ear ringing, last hoopla of the year.

He really felt like a moron for thinking even for a moment, somewhere inside, that he would have been better off not coming here, that he would have been better off not being nominated as a Committee Member. Ryuuji truly felt that that part of him, the part that had almost thought that he should have forgotten about the party, and instead, call Minori over to give her his present, was an idiot.

After all, he was enjoying himself this much, wasn't he ?

That was why he wanted to be here, at this fun place at this moment, with Minori, right? He wanted to watch Taiga and Ami's surprise performance with her didn't he

? He wanted to gaze at that shining tree, whilst being shined on by the twinkling of Taiga's star, and enjoy this happy party with her, didn't he?

Ryuuji put down the fruit punch ladle and once again prayed from his heart. *Kushieda, please come here. Please come before the party ends. Everyone's having fun, everyone's smiling, and if you're not here, nobody'll be rewarded. Without you, this relay of happiness won't work. This is the amazing moment that I want to see off with smiles, together with you.* The ladle was shaking from Ryuuji's powerful prayers.

It couldn't be anywhere else. It couldn't be anytime else. The night that he wanted to spend with Minori, had to be at this party. This night was for the sake of Minori's smile.

Then, Taiga, from the stage, noticed Ryuuji watching her. Keeping eye contact, Taiga curved her lips into a smile. *Surprised you, didn't I? You're blown away, aren't you ?* She seemed as though she wanted to say that. She swiveled around, back to the audience. Waiting three beats, she then turned back. And in that instant, Taiga winked. So fast that no one would notice, and only at Ryuuji.

"I....I.....Idiot!"

He was taken aback, but then grinned. *I'm not responsible if you forget you're a klutz and mess up.*

But Taiga, despite being Taiga, didn't mess up her choreography. She pushed down her mic stand at the same time and at the same angle as the others, then kicked up the pole, returning it to its original form quickly. Seems like this was all a cinch for the Lord Angel Taiga that had been claiming that Minori will definitely come, that he didn't have to worry. This was, for all intents and purposes, a miracle wasn't it?

"Takasu-kun! Fruit punch please!"

"Hey, I'm first! I'm thirsty!"

The people that got a little too roused up too early came to his booth in flocks, seeking liquid nourishment. Ryuuji snapped out of his trance, remembered his position as a Committee Member, and said, "Okay, okay, please get back in line!" as he swung his ladle. He narrowed his eyes with life-or-death determination, vowing not to spill even one drop.

Amidst the smiles of the people singing, the people dancing, the people talking, the people that just wanted to be loud, and the people waiting for somebody, the night passed. Kitamura also came over and explained why he was dressed like that. He thought he had a full Santa costume, but when he had begun changing at the last minute, he realized that that there was no top. He didn't have time to get another outfit, so he had no choice but to go out like that....was what the story was apparently, but.

"...Couldn't you have just worn a T-shirt?"

"Ah, I see! I could have done that! You should have told me earlier!"

"...It's not too late to wear something now."

"Huh!? What!? I can't hear you!"

By the time that Ryuuji realized Taiga was gone, the background music had switched to the latest Western music and the stage curtains had closed.

* * *

"So this is where you were!"

His arm was suddenly pulled from behind and he lost his balance.

"Ou!..... Geez, you scared me."

"Eh, I can't hear you! It's really crowded..... Kya!"

"It's Ami-chan, it's Ami-chan, it's Ami-chan! Ami-chan's descended to the mortal plane!" He could see guys from all over the place paddling through the waves of people to get near, like they were bugs attracted to a bug zapper. If the "Ami-sama Love" Happi-coated men hadn't encircled Ami with their own bodies and warded off the crowds of people with screams of "Don't touch her !" "Don't get any closer!", the two just might have been

stuck in the center of a squishy Ring-a-Round-the-Roses circle and suffocated.

After somehow getting enough space for two in front of the tree, Ami covered one of her ears in the noise and smiled at him with her deep rosy, alluring lips.

"Hey, hey, how was the song!? You were surprised weren't you!"

"Yeah, that really caught me off guard! When did you guys rehearse that?"

"It was like a surprise present ♥ for the guys in the Preparatory Committee!"

Their current location was right in the center of the music and the noise, and it wasn't going to be possible to have a conversation on the same wavelength without both of them shouting. Dressed up more beautifully than anyone else in her tight black dress, Ami raised up both her hands from under the light, and then said, "Ah, I love this song~!" while dancing to the music. Whistles and cheering arose from the glittering confetti. The people encircling her also raised up their arms like Ami and shook them to the rhythm.

"This is my song! Come on, Takasu-kun, raise up your hands too! Hey, what happened today!? I like so didn't expect you to come here with such a chic suit!"

She came so close to him that he could feel her body heat. Both his hands were grabbed and lifted up while glares of jealousy and envy were stabbing at his back, but ...

"Ho-hold on! I'm looking for Taiga right now!"

"Eh!? What!?"

Ryuuji wasn't in the mood to be dancing around merrily. Making his way through the dancing people with hand chops and saying "Excuse me, person in the back! Excuse me!" Kitamura, now wearing a T-shirt and having removed the beard and hat, made his appearance.

"Ou, Kitamura! Over here! Was she over there!?"

"No, she wasn't there! Nobody saw her! Oh, good timing, Ami, do you know!? We can't find Aisaka anywhere! We've been looking for her!"

Ami stopped dancing. He got the feeling that her lips moved slightly. However, it was far too hectic and packed, and whatever she said didn't reach Ryuuji's ears.

"Eh!? What did you say!? I can't hear you!"

He brought his ears closer to the mouth of Ami, who was almost as tall as he was. Ami brought her body closer to him, as if she was going to wrap her arms around him, and cupped the area between Ryuuji's ears and her own mouth, and said it.

"I said, she went back home."

"She said, she's going to see Minori-chan. She'll drag her here. Then, she'll go back home. She said she doesn't want to get in the way and she's going to get ready for Christmas and wait for Santa."

Ryuuji looked back at Ami, his mouth agape like an idiot. Ami's large eyes reflected the illumination and emanated powerful and cold light straight at him.

"....You didn't know? You had no idea this would happen? You really had no idea?"

He nodded.

The dance music played. Amid the crowds of people shaking their hands high in the air, Ryuuji could do nothing else but nod. He couldn't move. It doesn't make any sense. Kitamura asked, "What!?", and looking back at Kitamura's face, he thought so once again.

It doesn't make any sense at all.

"Why? ....Why does she have to do that!?"

"How should I know!?"

"Why does she have to go back home!?"

"I said I don't know! ....Maybe, there's something she didn't want to see!?"

"......Eh....?"

"That's why I warned you. Crud, I had enough. No matter what I say to you, it doesn't make a difference. You don't listen to what I say..... None of you do.... I'm finished here."

Ami powerfully pushed Ryuuji's chest away as if she was struggling to get away. Ryuuji was overtaken by her force and his legs tripped over themselves. Ami didn't even bother to look back.

"Okay I'm tired, I'm going home. Out of the way, get out of the damn way! Oh, why does it have to be so crowded..... Pain in the ass! I want to be by myself, I'm tired!"

Saying so, she forced her body away from the crowd and tottered away. "What's wrong, Ami-chan!" " Ami-chan, where you going!?" "Come on, let's dance!" - "*I said, out of the way!*" Screaming, Ami escaped from the arms of the people approaching her. Her white neck, white back, disappeared in the circle of dancing people. Her voice was buried in the music and faded away.

And Ryuuji was left.

"What did she say!? Did Ami know anything!?"

".....She said, she left....."

"Sorry, couldn't hear! One more time!"

".....Taiga! Went home!"

"Eh!? Why!? Aisaka didn't even spend any time enjoying herself!"

Yeah, yeah she really didn't. He looked at his friend's eye-widened face. Ryuuji held his chest which was still hurting from Ami's shove.

Taiga still hasn't enjoyed herself at this party. She didn't even have the time to talk to Kitamura. The party was a success. Everybody's having fun. Everybody's smiling. But Taiga, she still hasn't been rewarded in the slightest way for this.

"I wonder what happened!? Wait, maybe she felt sick!? "

"I....don't...know...."

I don't know.

Ryuuji stood motionless in the growing mob and scratched his head. He couldn't move a muscle. He didn't get it. Why did it have to be like this?

It was for Ryuuji's sake that Taiga prepared that suit.

It was for the sake of everyone, it was for the sake of building up the mood of the party that she dressed up, sung, and danced.

And again, it was for Ryuuji's sake, that Taiga left. She left, to call Minori, to not get in the way?

"....But then, if you go back home, by yourself.....who is going to make you smile? Is this being a part of the happy scenery?"

Mumbling this, he saw, with the corner of his eyes, the Christmas tree shine. Taiga's shattered star did twinkle. But, no matter how beautiful it is, no matter how bright, if she isn't here, there's no point. If she wasn't laughing with him under that bright tree, she couldn't be rewarded. For whose sake is tonight so beautiful? For whose sake will Christmas come? Isn't it for everybody? An "everybody" that includes Taiga? Everybody has to be happy. Did you forget that you even said that, you klutzy tiger?

Or, do you really, think that Santa is watching? "I know it's hypocrisy, self-righteousness.". This is what

you've been saying the whole time, but you really believe that Santa is going to see you again if you stay a good girl?

But there is no Santa in the real world. There's no one that knows how much of a good girl Taiga's been. There's nobody watching. There's no God in the world. The town's glittering, the illuminations are shining, everybody's smiling, and a happy Christmas will be coming to the world, but, Taiga, won't be rewarded.

Isn't Taiga going to be alone again this year? ....Didn't she go back home alone? Aren't there any adults that'd help her? Yeah, there are, but those adults aren't next to Taiga now.

Thus, in the end, this year as well, Taiga's going to be alone?

He patted his face.

He was thinking, still unmoving.

How do I save tonight's relay?

He looked again at Kitamura's face. He was about to wrench a voice out from his throat but *No, that's not it...*,

and swallowed down what he was going to say. He finally realized it.

There is one person that has been watching.

And there's someone that knows Taiga's loneliness.

Only one person in the world. There is only one person who has always been watching Taiga from nearby. The baton to be handed to Taiga is right here in this hand.

There's only one person that knows that Taiga has been a good girl.

And his name is Takasu Ryuuji.

In other words – me.

* * *

"Is that true? Is that really true?"

Her friend had asked her that again and again. She had patiently nodded each time to say that it was true. " Ryuuji said he won't leave until Minorin comes. He's ready to stay overnight at the school." ....The words she had repeated had become close to blackmail. For the first time in a long time, she had come to the Kushieda residence, and at its door, Minori had stood still for a while, at a loss, biting her lips.

Taiga remembered the expression on her face.

".....I'm sorry, Minorin."

There was no way Minori could hear her, but even so, she whispered gently to herself.

"But, you want to go don't you? You really want to go, don't you? ....I know. We're friends. If we weren't, I wouldn't be able to do this much."

After all of that stuff she had said, there was no way Minori wouldn't go to the party. It was good enough if she was going because she couldn't let him stay overnight at the school. The rest would be up to him.

The stockings that she had tossed away were hanging on the sofa. The clutch bag was on the floor and her short fur coat was laid crumpled by the door. She was terribly tired, and not having the energy to take off her dress, she wrapped Ryuuji's muffler around her cold shoulders. She hadn't stolen it from him this time. When she sneezed on the walk back home to change, Ryuuji had wrapped it around her. She'd been busy with the preparations for the party and had forgotten to give it back.

She buried her nose into the softness of the cashmere and filled her lungs with its familiar smell. She exhaled and put her chin against the warmth of her own breath.

The blisters on her heel hurt and it was too much of a bother to stand. Sitting sloppily on the floor, she weakly lowered the lighting in the living room with the remote control. Today, she left the TV off, and the wide room was quiet, as if it was the bottom of the ocean.

On the low table was a small glass tree. She gently took out the candle inside along with the whole tray, and very carefully lit it with a lighter she bought at a convenience store. She did it carefully, quite carefully. No way was she going to die in a fire on Christmas Eve.

In the darkened living room, an orange-colored light warmly shimmered. The glass tree really was beautiful. The aroma of the candle gave off a light scent that tickled her nose.

She removed the pin that tightly bound her hair and resting her elbows on the table, watched the shimmering flame. The only thing that grated her was the sound of the heater. She put the muffler around her head and covered her ears. The room was filled with silence, and she felt that it was fine like this. Her body, exhausted from the calamity of the past few days, seemed like it was about doze off now.

Once again, she was alone. Santa wouldn't come. Even if she tried acting like a good girl just at this time of year, she realized it was too late, as if she just remembered it. After all, this year, she even got herself suspended, and the truth was, there was no Santa either.

That's why, this year, she was alone again. And next year, she would probably be alone too.

And probably, for the years that lay ahead as well, she would always, always, always be alone. As she closed her eyes to a drowsiness close to a peaceful death, Taiga mused. As long as she lived, she would probably always be alone. Just like everything until now, she would be alone forever. She was born under those parents, under that destiny, so it couldn't be helped.

She closed her eyes.

What a life. If she had to say so for herself, she did feel like she could manage, kind of, if she assumed there was "someone" out there. Of course, she knew that was it just a dream. It was because she knew that she could let herself believe that.

She couldn't let herself count on something, on someone. She couldn't live out "Aisaka Taiga's" life with that weak a heart. She had to become strong in order to live alone. But if it was a dream, if it was some short-lived unrealistic fantasy, then that wouldn't be clinging on something, right? If she killed someone she hated in her imagination, that wouldn't be a crime. If she

embraced someone in her imagination, it wasn't something that person would know about. That was how it worked. Even if she was living in a dream, that shouldn't make her weak.

"……You're saying that, even when you are so clinging on someone...."

"!?"

She sprung up.

Did she fall asleep? No, it's only been a few minutes. It felt like something suddenly crashed and then she thought she heard someone's voice say something, but,

"……Eh!?"

This time, she really did jump up. She got up on her knees by reflex and looked toward the direction where the sound came from.

There was a knocking sound on glass.....probably the window. She could hear it coming from the bedroom.

A thief? A pervert? A murderer? ....The sound returned, one more time, this time clearer. Taiga stood up without

making a sound. She tightly covered her exposed shoulders with her muffler and boldly ventured into the bedroom. *Please, oh God no. This has to be a joke. I don't want to die from a fire, but being killed by someone is even worse. My wooden sword is in the bedroom. I have confidence in my strength. I don't know if I could take on a real criminal, but it is better than going down without a fight.* She opened the door, stepped barefooted in the cold, dark bedroom, opened the curtains with the readiness to die, and...

"....."

Shriek

What screamed was only the bottom of her throat. She was so shocked that she lost her voice.

Her knees gave way and she fell to the floor.

Why was there – outside the window, at the divider between the apartment from the Takasu residence, in a posture close to falling, hands on the window, and pounding on the glass – a bear, a bear with a Santa hat?

The hands of the bear pounded on the glass even harder, as if he was saying, *I'm going to fall!* It looked like he was about to, as his footing was wobbling. His

stiffened body was trembling. It was only a matter of seconds before he was about to fall, and witnessing the very moment of his crisis,

"Sa–"

Her hesitations were blown away and she hastily opened the window without thinking.

".....Santa....?"

She pulled him inside. If it wasn't Santa, she would be in big, big trouble. But the bear was pulled inside Taiga's bedroom, rested on the floor on all fours for a while, caught his breath like he was exhausted, and soon nodded.

As if to say, *I am Santa*.

"No way..... Really?"

He nodded one more time. Slowly, while holding down his enormous head. *It's true. I really am Santa*. He eloquently expressed that more than anything else.

Even she didn't quite understand just what it was that came over her, but...

".....Ahhahahaha! What is this!? Ahahaha!"

Before she knew it, Taiga broke into laughter. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and exploded into laughter. The whole situation was too ridiculous, but , yes, she did believe. This was Santa Claus. A Santa bear came. Because she stayed a good girl, he came to see her again just like he promised. While laughing wholeheartedly, she grabbed Santa's hand. She helped him stand up, tugged on his arm as he tottered, and brought him to her messy living room.

"Santa! Look, this is this year's tree!"

The bear's black plastic eyes looked at the small tree. Then, he turned to Taiga and gave her the thumbs up. Santa approved!

"Yay! I knew it, I knew this was beautiful! Yes, yes, this is soooo great! It's so great that Santa complimented my tree..... No, it's not just the tree! This is great, this is great, this is great! I can't believe it, you really came! Santa really came! You're a bear, but a bear is fine too! This is perfect! .....It's like...a dream.....!"

Taiga screamed, jumping up and down. She jumped again and again and turned each time. She was so happy, so happy, and even threw a kiss with both hands to the ceiling.

Then, she sung that Christmas song she spent so much time rehearsing for the band. Hop, step, then jump! Then, she jumped and clung to Santa's torso. She hung on to him as much as she could. She hugged him for dear life with all her might. The warm Santa bear gently put out both his arms and firmly hugged Taiga's body. He patted her head, stroked her hair, and hugged back her body.

Have there ever been arms that had hugged her like this before?

Were there arms other than these that wouldn't betray the heart she entrusted to them?

There weren't, there weren't, there weren't. There weren't any others, anywhere in the world. Those arms could only be found here. The heat of joy surged from the depths of her body. Her tension rose and she felt like she was becoming an idiot. She wasn't alone this year. Taiga closed her eyes and rubbed her cheeks against his

warm chest. This year, Santa came. It wasn't a dream. It was real. He hugged her. How.....happy, she was.

While still hanging on to him with all her might, Taiga continued to sing. She nestled her face into his dusty body. With her bare legs, she danced in steps to the song. The Santa bear also danced. Right, left, turn, then turn the other way.

She guffawed like an idiot, danced so much her legs tripped over each other, hung on to him, and sung a really terrible song. She sung in loops just the phrases she loved. She kept hugging him, tripping, and laughed so much that tears came falling out..... She knew she couldn't keep doing this forever. Taiga knew deep down inside. If only this moment would last forever. If only she could keep dancing with the Santa bear forever.

But...

"Aaaah....this is real, isn't it! My dream's become real....!"

Muttering this, she lifted her head.

Then she made one long sigh.

Her unattainable wish was granted and became real. If this was a dream, it would have been okay to wish for it to last forever. After all, no matter how much she wished for it, she would wake up from it one day.

But, because reality didn't work that way...

"......Thank you."

She had to, with her own arms, with her own pulsing arms, close the curtains herself.

"Thank you..... Ryuuji."

Catching her breath after laughing too much, she took off the head of the pained-looking bear. A red face dripping with sweat even though it was the middle of winter appeared. "Ah! Don't take it off you idiot!" She laughed on reflex. *Why are you fretting that much? You didn't actually think I wouldn't find out, did you?*

"So, where did you get that?"

"...I borrowed it from someone wearing it."

Although he brusquely turned his eyes away, Ryuuji, however, smiled clumsily. The hair he had combed back was sticking to his forehead with sweat, and was a mess. Rather, more important than his hair was...

"Hey.... What happened to the suit?"

"I traded it with the guy that was wearing this. Ah, of course I'll get it back! I will, I will!"

Sigh..... What an idiot, Ryuuji really is an idiot.

"I can't believe you'd take it off when you still have the night ahead of you! Geez, you idiot! You idiot, idiot, idiot ! Even when I gave it to you! Even though you're supposed to be meeting Minorin!"

"What do you mean I'm an idiot!? .....What!? What do you mean I'm supposed to be meeting Minorin!?"

"I told you to believe in Lord Angel Taiga, didn't I? Minorin should be heading to the party. She might already be there. Come on, you can still make it, hurry up!"

"What!? But....wait, but...today... I'm already a mess, and I came back because I didn't want to leave you by yourself."

"What are you talking about!? Don't worry about me!"

She pushed the body of the dilly-dallier hard and tilted her body back, laughing.

"Santa and good girl role playing... It's been a while since I laughed so hard that my stomach hurt! Your performance.....it was hilarious! Ah, I'm looking forward to tomorrow of course, to the meal you

promised. You'll do fine with Minorin, and tomorrow, we'll eat at your house! You didn't forget did you!?"

"O-of course not! There's no way I'd forget!"

"Good! ....Come on, go! Get up! Hurry up! If Ryuuji doesn't go to the party, that'll make me a liar to Minorin."

Ryuuji's eyes looked over Taiga.

Taiga shrugged her shoulders and smiled again. She pointed at Ryuuji's face from the front.

"And, 'Santa' has already come, right? .....I already received my compensation. That's why, this year, I have to be a good girl until the very end. Let me keep being a good girl. Sending Minorin to the party is the real present I'm giving to you. That's why....take it. Please."

"Are you really okay by yourself?"

She thought Ryuuji had said something like that. And repeating over and over again, "I'm fine, don't worry, go on", Taiga forcefully pulled Ryuuji's arm. She was about to push him out from the hallway to the door, but Ryuuji shouted "Ou!" like he noticed something, and returned to the living room. That dilly-dallier. Just when she was

wondering what that was about, Ryuuji blew out the candle inside the tree – "Fire has been taken care of!" – and pointed at it. He couldn't leave without any worries if the candle was still lit, or something like that.

He really is such a nitpicker.

"Oookay, okay, okay. I get it. I'm a klutz so I won't light it anymore. I swear. That's good enough, right? .... Geez, you're so annoying..... I get it, so hurry up! The party's going to end! Go on, go on! Go, go!"

She pushed away his back with slaps. She even kicked him in the rear. She threw out Ryuuji from the front door to the hallway with pushes and shoves. *If he walks outside like that, he's definitely going to stick out but..... No, it's Christmas Eve after all. He might actually fit in.*

"Get out already you dilly-dallying dog!"

"Thanks!" was what Ryuuji shouted in the end after finally turning his back. Before the door was closed, Taiga didn't look at Ryuuji once.

The door was locked.

He finally left.

She took a breath. Mission accomplished. Angel Taiga did what she had to do. The sound of the footsteps descending the stairway grew softer and softer until finally, they became inaudible.

"Aaah. I'm so tired..."

It was her own fault for making a big commotion. The inside of her lonely room returned back to its former silence. While she stretched, she returned to the living room barefooted.

The noise of the heater was definitely jarring in her all-too-quiet room. When Ryuuji had been there, she had forgotten all about it.

"He finally left, he finally left, he finally left..."

She returned onto the top of the rug. While humming a stupid song, she thought about lighting the tree again. She'd do it carefully. She'd be fine. She'd already bought a candle. It would be a waste not to light it. But,

"...Huh? Huh, huh, huh...why?"

She couldn't find the lighter.

Where did she put it? She traced back her steps. The only thing she remembered was that she placed it right over here. Then Ryuuji came in, she made that big ruckus like an idiot, and then the flame had been blown out,

"...Ah. Maybe he..."

Ryuuji took it with him, thinking she'd try to light it again. That had to be it. On top of being a Santa without a present, he actually committed robbery. He had guts. When the 25th was over, she was so going to kill him by 2/3rds of his life.

She reluctantly stood up and looked to see if there was anything else she could use. Taiga looked at the desk Ryuuji had kept neat, looked at the AV board Ryuuji had kept neat, looked at the kitchen drawers Ryuuji had kept neat, but she couldn't find a lighter nor a match.

She couldn't move out of irritation. It was her own house yet she didn't know where anything was. She couldn't even light a candle.

"...No, I've had it."

He really is a nitpicker.

"No, I..."

And despite being a nitpicker, he made the most nonsensical entrance. A bear? Please.

"No."

He should have made it in time, shouldn't he?

"No."

His feelings toward Minori, he should have sai-

"..."

No.

"...What? Why?"

She asked herself out of surprise. When she touched her face, the tips of her fingers were wet.

Why were there tears pouring down her cheeks?

"Ah.....I get it now."

She thought about it a little, then silently nodded her head and understood why.

It was because, this was the end.

She clung on to and lived with Ryuuji as if he were a dream. While making nonsensical excuses to herself like, "I'm not relying on him, I'm just making him help me out ," while thinking, "It's just for now anyway. Because if Ryuuji moves, or I move, or he dates Minori, or I date Kitamura-kun, we can't stay together like this." She had lived together with Ryuuji. She lived, counting on Ryuuji's kindness. This is a dream, so it isn't being weak, right? Just this much should be okay, shouldn't it?

That ended tonight.

She believed that Minori was attracted to Ryuuji. She believed that Ryuuji really liked Minori. In other words, their feelings were mutual. That was why they would probably be together. When that happens, she wouldn't be able to stay with him any longer. She wouldn't be able to go in and out of his house like before. No matter what happens, she wouldn't be able to call Ryuuji. She wouldn't be able to walk side by side with Ryuuji. The one next to him wasn't her.

That was why...

"No."

She was sad.

She was surprised.

She never thought about it before. She didn't even give it a thought that she wouldn't want to be separated from Ryuuji. The one she was attracted to, the one she adored, the one in her dreams had always been Kitamura Yuusaku. She only thought of him. The one she loved should have been Kitamura Yuusaku. Why was this happening?

She remembered that day when Kitamura Yuusaku confessed to the woman he loved and had been hurt. She remembered how angry she had been on that day when she went to pulverize Kanou Sumire without thinking of her own future.

She was concerned more about Kitamura than herself that day. She was worried about Kitamura's suffering more than her own. The reason why she was able to put her own heart on hold was probably because Ryuuji was there. Because she believed Ryuuji would understand her

. That was why she didn't have to look at her own pain. Ryuuji had always been by her, watching over her.

And that had been the correct thing, hadn't it? When she committed the mistake of violence, the one who grabbed her arm, the one who stopped her, the one who saved her had been Ryuuji.

She had been spoiled and cared by him like that. Without realizing it, she had been counting on his kindness.

She was able to love because she felt near her the definite power of Ryuuji.

Because when she had been daydreaming about doing this and that with Kitamura, being thought of like this and that, Ryuuji had always watched over her. Because she had entrusted her heart to Ryuuji.

It was as if she didn't realize it at all until this happened – until she lost him. She hadn't understood at all how fortunate she was to have a place to entrust her heart to. She hadn't thought of Ryuuji as being "strength". Why? She wanted to kick her own empty head. She

hadn't understood what she had been standing on. Without Ryuuji, how could anything bloom? She couldn't even wipe away the tears falling down her chin.

Without Ryuuji, I can't even be in love.

After all, at this moment, I can barely stand.

I don't know if I can continue living.

I needed Ryuuji.

In other words, I had been in love with Ryuuji.

I have been, since a long time ago.

I don't want it to end like this, I don't want this to be the end, I don't want to leave Ryuuji's side. I can't bear it, I can't go on living, I can't take it. I...

No!

"....!"

She ran without knowing what she was doing.

She ran out of the living room, kicked open the door with her bare feet, and ran out. She ran down the cold hallway. Following the stairway Ryuuji walked down from, Taiga ran down three steps at a time. The fringe of her mini skirt ripped. Not knowing how to stop her pouring tears, she dashed past the marble entrance like there was no tomorrow. She held her breath, as if praying. *Please, please, let me make it in time.*

She pressed her body against the heavy glass door to open it. She tripped outside into the chilly, gusty road.

The cold asphalt pierced her naked feet.

She looked right. She looked left. He wasn't there. Ryuuji was gone. He wasn't here. What should she do? She covered her tear-distorted face. Her feet stopped, and breathing in all the wintery air her lungs could handle, she screamed at the nighttime sky,

".....Ryuujiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....!!"

She noticed a passing couple looking at her in surprise. "A fight?" "I feel sorry for her... It's Christmas Eve isn't it...?" *So I'm pitiful am I*. Taiga wailed with an even louder voice like an infant.

She cried and cried, and called out Ryuuji's name.

She knew it wouldn't reach him, but she still continued . She continued yelling even as her throat became sore. Her heart was trashed, as if a storm had passed through it, but her head was clear. A part of her looked down on her wailing self. *That was why I hate reality. Unlike dreams, reality can break. Things are lost.*

The moment he stepped in when she wanted him to, the feeling of holding him, it was all real. The fact that she wished to be with him, to not lose him, was also real. All of that broke into pieces and disappeared.

Yes, she had been dreaming a foolish dream the whole time.

The idea that she only adored Ryuuji as a father figure, and the thought that once Ryuuji and Minori were together, she'd be able to "leave the nest" and survive alone. This was the future that she'd envisioned, but it was all a complete misunderstanding. How stupid of her. She'd been thinking something as brainless as being able to bear her loneliness because Ryuuji, her father figure, wanted her to survive on her own. She convinced herself that that was what a father did.

But reality was different. Ryuuji wasn't her father. Her attachment toward her father, who didn't care about her, and her attachment to Ryuuji were different. The moment they parted ways, her "leaving of the nest" wasn't positive at all. She only felt "loss". She lost Ryuuji and now she had to live out her solitary future by herself.

The truth was she wanted to be with Ryuuji. It took this to happen for her to realize it. They had always moved forward through each coming day, hand in hand. But now that was impossible. Everything was too late. Reality broke. She had woken up from her dream. The only thing left was herself.

Where did she make the mistake? Ryuuji even told her that, "I'm a dragon. You're a tiger. The dragon and the tiger stand equal to each other." But her stupid self saw only dreams and hung on to Ryuuji as much as she could , being spoiled by him, counting on him, and chose to run away from the issue, disregarding it completely. She had put it off, thinking that one day, one day, she would leave him, and this was the result.

"...Ryuuji...!"

The world was flooded in tears.

"I don't care anymore, I hope everything breaks." she wanted to say. If this was a movie or a drama, she'd be moved off-screen, or maybe the male lead would appear before her. But reality was cruel, and the cameras wouldn't move away naturally nor would Ryuuji appear. It would be dramatic if she died of exhaustion, but humans don't die so easily. She in particular was made too tough.

She was miserable, bitter, sad, lonely, and pitifully stupid. But, she was alive. That was Taiga's reality. She wouldn't run away. She cried, but she wouldn't die here.

Because she wanted to become strong.

Because that was the truth.

She remembered the beauty contest at the Cultural Festival. She stood up that time. This time, she'll prove that she can stand up. Even without Ryuuji's support, even without Minori's support, she'll prove that she can stand up by herself. She'll prove that she can live on by herself from now on for the rest of her life. She'll prove that she can get up.

She lifted her tear-stricken face.

She will live, accepting and taking everything, no matter how shameful it was. She has already lost a lot, received a lot of pain, and been battered as she grew up, but one day, she will definitely become a truly strong adult.

She will get up, dammit, to reach that future. Even if she falls again and again, she'll stubbornly get up each time. So what if she was abandoned by her parents? Bring it on. So what if she got suspended? Bring it on. So what if Ryuuji is gone? Bring it on. Bring it on. Bring it on .

This will be the training she needs to live out the rest of her long life by herself.

Even so, she yelled out his name one last time out of lingering regret and,

"Ryu.....ACHOO! ....Ah..."

A powerful sneeze blew it away.

It was too cold to be outside with her feet and shoulders exposed. Her nose started running. Taiga

clamped her back teeth down, sniffed, and stood up sluggishly. She brushed away the dirt on her knees. She rubbed her face which itched from the tears and mucus. She stood up, walked, and disgracefully returned to her apartment building.

And then, this time, she finally will be alone.

And then, and then.

Taiga wouldn't know until later, but when she ran out from the entrance of her apartment, at the same time, Minori had been there on the other side of the street. She hadn't just been passing by. She had come to the apartment to hear what Taiga's true feelings were.

And then, and then, and then.

After seeing all of this, Minori understood; what she had suspected hadn't been wrong at all.

* * *

Ah, I really did it this time.

The stars and the moon twinkled romantically in the midwinter sky, and shined weirdly on Ryuuji's contorted ogre face.

Ryuuji, still in the bear costume, stood in front of the school gate. The present he was going to give to Minori was still in the pocket of his suit and he didn't know the phone number of the guy he traded it with. He just now realized that it was someone from a different class. He bungled up at the last minute. Minori wasn't in the hall yet, but he still couldn't find that guy. He might have already gone home after Ryuuji had left the hall.

Thinking that maybe he was still hanging around nearby, Ryuuji scurried out of the hall and into the chilly outside weather, but there were no signs of people anywhere. He wondered what he should do as he carried the bear head under his arms, briefly exhaling a white

breath. Just how was he supposed to talk to her without a present?

I screwed up, Taiga. The single mistake quickly shook his heart unsteadily. He suddenly became afraid and wanted to run away. But the reason why he wouldn't do that was because he felt like he received the imaginary baton from Taiga, who even kicked him in the back to get him to come. If he didn't hand it to the next person, Taiga's wishes wouldn't be passed on. The relay in his dreams will break.

He had lost the present, but his hand wasn't empty.

Ryuuji clenched the cheap synthetic fiber bear hand. In the cold midwinter wind, he quietly confronted the part of him that was becoming timid. What he wanted to show Minori was always inside him. Nothing was going to happen if he ran away. He stretched his back inside the baggy costume, stood up straight, and lifted his face. It wasn't a Gucci suit, but Taiga's present was definitely in his hands.

Then.

"Howdy!"

"....O, ou.....!"

Arriving with light footsteps was a knit-capped Minori . Minori, whom he had been waiting for so long.

His mind went blank. His body stiffened like he was paralyzed.

Minori, wearing a down coat, denim pants, and a red-checkered muffler, sternly brought up her gloved right hand and smiled as her nose, red from the cold, sniffed the air.

Ryuuji hesitated, but it wasn't because of the cold. He was trembling from panic more than he thought. *First, tell her thanks for coming. Explain why you're wearing that stupid costume. Then, tell her why you wanted her to come. ....* was what he had been thinking, but the moment he saw Minori, all of that went flying away. Everything was about to come on. Everything inside his heart was about to come out, regardless of the order. He desperately tried to force it inside and simply stood there.

"That's a nice bear you got there, Takasu-kun."

The one who made the first move was Minori. Ryuuji, as stiff as a board, saw the expression on Minori's face in

a normal conversation between the two of them, the first time in a while.

Minori noticed how he was looking at her, and pulled her cap down tight. Ryuuji automatically pushed up the knit cap which had been covering her eyes.

"....."

"....."

The two of them stayed silent. Minori, once again, grabbed her knit cap and pulled it further down. Ryuuji pushed it up again. She pulled it down again. He pushed it up. This unintelligible secret war continued, until finally,

"Ku, Kushieda!"

Ryuuji took off Minori's knit cap. Minori froze for a moment, and he wondered what she was thinking. She covered her face with both her hands.

He grabbed her wrist because he wanted to see her face. He tried to pull a hand away from her face, but Minori was very strong, and he couldn't easily pry it away.

"Wha, what's up with you!? What!"

"More like, what's wrong with you Takasu-kun!?"

"No, it should be what's wrong with you!?"

"Takasu-kun is the one, Takasu-kun is the one that..... Ah...I've had it! Deeeeeeeei!"

Habu! And thus, Ryuuji became unable to say anything next. Minori used both hands to unfairly grab and hold down Ryuuji's lips.

"Bubi.....be.....ua.....!?"

".....Takasu-kun....sorry. Let me say this first."

Saying so, she pushed her face through the space between her extended arms. She looked straight down. She wouldn't show what expression she had to Ryuuji. Then, she quietly went on.

"Hey....do you remember? Back at summer vacation, at Amin's villa. We talked about it in the evening, right. About that weird stuff. Like UFOs and ghosts."

"Bu.....bu.....?"

While moaning "ububu", Ryuuji slightly tilted his head , thinking, *What?* He had no idea what Minori was trying to say.

If he recalled correctly, Minori once described love in terms of UFOs and ghosts. The people that could see them will see tons, but she didn't think they existed since she couldn't see anything, or something like that. Then, she said that it could be because she simply couldn't see them. That's right. That's why he had been wishing that it'd be great if Minori also could see UFOs or ghosts.

But there must be a lot of significance to remembering this now, right?

"You know, about the UFOs and ghosts. I think that I don't have to see them at all..... It looks like it's better that I don't. Lately, I've been thinking about it a whole lot, and I've come to feel that way..... I just wanted to say that to you, Takasu-kun. That's the reason I came here."

And a whole lot was turned rightside up, just now. A lot of significance.

"Sorry for saying just what I wanted to say..... Kushieda out."

Minori's fingers gently separated themselves from Ryuuji's lips. Her hand gently took back the knit cap from Ryuuji's hand.

She tightly fitted it on, pulled it down up to her eyes, and gave a salute with one hand. It looked like only her lips laughed.

Minori then turned away.

She strode away in big steps briskly and went home like that.

What?

In other words?

She could tell I was going to confess and then turned me down in advance?

"......Eh? Really?"

I was shot down?

Really?

Right now?

Seriously?

"....Is this heartbreak....?"

On the midwinter night street, Ryuuji stood as still as a rock. Popping up in his head were endless question marks. He needn't have even bothered worrying about the present. He had been totally rejected. The pain still wouldn't come. He simply stood there in a daze from the dull shock and looked at the sky.

"Things may break, but they can be fixed." *I don't think it's going to be fixed anymore.*

"And for each time something breaks, it can just be made all over again." *I have the feeling that I can't make it again.*

"That's why, there's no reason to cry if something breaks." *I can't even cry at the moment.*

Still, he looked for Orion which would surely be shining up above him.

He looked for someone within the call of his voice.

The sky...rotated....in a big way.

* * *

December 25th, 10 AM.

Ryuuji was discovered, sprawled on the kitchen floor by Yasuko, who had just woken up. Just when did he fall , nobody other than him knows. That was why, even now, no one knows.

Ryuuji had been hit by influenza, with a fever of over 39 degrees celsius.

He was admitted into the hospital he was carried to and was still not fully conscious. Informed by Yasuko, Taiga came to the hospital in a big rush and had strangely swollen eyes and a sniffling nose herself. It would be two days later, when Ryuuji became conscious, that she would find out what happened on Christmas Eve.

And thus, wounded all over, the year came to a close. Christmas, end-of-year cleaning, all of it melted away inside Ryuuji's fever-induced dream.

"....and then, i, demonically transmigrated....."

"Ryuu-chaaa~n, hang in there~! Get a hold of yourself ~!" Despite the tearful voice of his mother in the background, Ryuuji's bubbling brain continued to babble about his delusion.

"....i fired killing beams with taiga bibibi, bibibi....i wanted to rule the world....i think.... but mom was the one pulling the strings and when i took off her mask, i saw kushieda's face....what...what, kushieda. what are you. then, the bachelorette's red string was cut, and she gave in to despair, and....bought...an apartment...."

Ryuuji was fighting something with a sword in one hand in a world of blazing magic. He jumped into the air, slashed away at shadows, shouted names of special moves, while somewhere inside regretting, "I couldn't take out the big trash!"

".....but it was an apartment with.....anti-earthquake fraud....."

"Hang in there you coward!" A small hand gave him a slap. "Ah, his eyes opened a little!" shouted his real mother. *Stop, it hurts.* But, he couldn't talk. Ryuuji only continued to vainly slash away at enemies in the world of magic.

Ah, how stupid, how stupid.

If he opened his eyes, just what was he supposed to see?

After all, haven't all the stars in the sky exploded and disappeared a long time ago?

And then, there was darkness.

Author's Notes

Officially into my thirties! This is T***miya Y*yuko (age 30). A day had come when I have forgotten the access code for my condominium main entrance.

This incident happened as I arrived at the entrance after walking my dog while wearing only a furry jacket on top of my pyjamas. I stood dumbstruck as I carried the dog in my arms. It was only four numbers, and yet they completely slipped from my mind. Besides, I also realized I was wearing my pants inside out, as I usually wake up in the afternoon. I tried pushing a few possible combinations, but the door still wouldn't open. As it was winter, I felt cold and embarrassing at the same time... Thank goodness a neighbour was around, or I wouldn't be able to go home. I really had that terrible feeling that how it's all over, as things are beginning to go downhill from now on. I can't stop myself from aging!

And so, I turn 30 this year, and Toradora! too has published its 7th volume. I thank every reader from the bottom of my heart. A... a, a, a... actually!

Since 2005, this series has released seven volumes plus one spin-off volume. Thanks to the support of everyone,

I now have something really, really amazing to announce : Toradora! is going to get its own anime adaptation! OH YEAHHHHH!!!!! (Translator note: This was written in 2008.)

Rather than being happy, I was more like "W, w, w, w, what should I do!?" To repay everyone's support, I will try my best to write many good stories for everyone to enjoy. I'm counting on you guys to give me your love and energy!

Due to the reason above, I cannot afford to age anymore! Oh, please let time stop in its track! ... Or rather , turn it backwards! In other words, even if it costs me my brain, give me back my youth! I can also pay with my body or age! Everyday I'm seriously wondering how to retain my youthfulness. Just as I was finished writing this volume, my left cheek was suddenly swollen, with a painful and hot red lump growing on it. At first I paid no notice to it, but very soon it grew so big I could no longer make any facial expressions. This obviously required a trip to the hospital. Upon entering the dermatology department, the doctor merely said, "Whoa!" upon seeing me, and duly pointed me towards the bed without explaining anything as he took out his knife to cut open, etc, etc,..... Is this punishment for being so stubborn with

being youthful? Could this be divine retribution for foolishly attempting to meddle with the flow of time? I can't believe I still get these even at this age. (You can stop speculating now, it isn't acne.) I feel so ashamed of myself. In that case, I might as well live my life to the fullest. Lately I've been eating lots of sweets, sending loads of glucose into my brain.

Once again, thanks to everyone for reading this till the end! The story will get even better in Toradora! Volume 8 , so stay tuned! Finally, to the main editor and Yasu-sensei, let's continue to work hard together!

Takemiya Yuyuko